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# **School Counselling in Malaysia: A Narrative Ethnography**

**Nurul Ain Mohd Daud**

**A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the  
requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Law**

**Graduate School of Education**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research examined the influence of cultural values on the acceptability of counselling for students in a Malaysian secondary school. Existing research which was largely quantitative suggested that students from Malay, Chinese and Indian cultural backgrounds would have divergent responses to school counselling. This qualitative research using narrative ethnographic approach sought to understand these interactions in greater depth. The study focused on one large urban secondary school with students from a range of cultural backgrounds. The researcher actively involved herself in the provision of counselling in order to conduct this study which engaged fifty seven pupils and staff in contributing narrative alongside observations of collective behaviours. The analysis was informed by the constant comparative method, a constructivist development of grounded theory. The findings in this particular study substantially contradicted the expectation that cultural diversity was a significant factor in the acceptability of counselling. In this school, systemic issues, particularly the relationship between counselling and other systems within the school was of paramount significance. In view of the findings, several implications and recommendations for understanding counselling services within the school system were put forward.

### **Keywords**

Cultural values      School counselling      Malaysia      Narrative ethnography  
Constructivist grounded theory      Systemic issues

## **DEDICATION**

To my beloved parents:

My father

Mohd Daud Awang

My mother

Wan Sepiah Wan Sulaiman



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Praise to Allah, the most gracious and the most merciful, for his endless blessings throughout my life and the entire PhD journey. I would never reach this journey without His divine guidance and without the support from the number of significant individuals in my life.

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author:

SIGNED:  .....

DATE: 1/12/11 .....

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## KEY TO TRANSCRIPTIONS

The following abbreviations and conventions have been used in the presentation of interview transcripts:

<i>Italics</i>	Represent the excerpts of the participants which derived from the interview data.
( )	Denotes researcher's explanation for clarity.
././.	Indicates material deleted from the interview excerpts.
...	Indicates pause during the participants' story telling.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>EPU</b>	<b>Economic Planning Unit</b>
<b>EPRD</b>	<b>Education Planning and Research Department</b>
<b>GSoE</b>	<b>Graduate School of Education</b>
<b>HSC</b>	<b>Higher School Certificate</b>
<b>MCE</b>	<b>Malaysian Certificate of Education</b>
<b>MPhil</b>	<b>Master of Philosophy</b>
<b>OECD</b>	<b>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</b>
<b>PERKAMA</b>	<b>Persatuan Kaunseling Malaysia</b>
<b>PhD</b>	<b>Doctor of Philosophy</b>
<b>PMR</b>	<b>Penilaian Menengah Rendah</b>
<b>PRS</b>	<b>Pembimbing Rakan Sebaya</b>
<b>PROSTAR</b>	<b>Program Sihat Tanpa AIDS untuk Remaja</b>
<b>UM</b>	<b>Universiti Malaya</b>
<b>UKM</b>	<b>Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia</b>
<b>UPM</b>	<b>Universiti Putra Malaysia</b>
<b>UPSI</b>	<b>Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris</b>
<b>UTM</b>	<b>Universiti Teknologi Malaysia</b>
<b>REBT</b>	<b>Rational emotive behavioural therapy</b>
<b>RM</b>	<b>Ringgit Malaysia</b>
<b>SLAD</b>	<b>Skim Lencana Anti Dadah</b>
<b>STF</b>	<b>Systems Theory Framework</b>
<b>SRP</b>	<b>Sijil Rendah Pelajaran</b>
<b>SPM</b>	<b>Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia</b>
<b>STTI</b>	<b>Specialist Teachers Training Institute</b>

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*What seem to us bitter trials are often blessings in disguise*

- Oscar Wilde

### **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to provide information about this study. It illustrates my reflexive accounts of experiences as well as motivations for embarking on this study. I also discuss the background of the study, including the historical contexts of the educational system in Malaysia, as well as the position of school counselling in that system. I finish this chapter with the detail of my research questions and an organisational structure for my thesis.

### **Personal intention for carrying out the study**

I never expected that one day I would become an academic. Although the idea of becoming a lecturer had occurred to me several times, I thought it was just an idealistic ambition. Admittedly, I did not consider it too seriously and tried to be realistic as I knew the aim of becoming a tutor in a public university was very challenging and competitive at that time. Being a mediocre student, honestly, I only had one simple ambition, which was to become a teacher; a job preference that was considered popular and typical among my peers, particularly for female human science students at that time. On the verge of graduation from my undergraduate studies, I was overwhelmed by my friends' preferences. Most of them kept repeating their intentions to become teachers, as they claimed that the profession could be a stepping-stone for joining the government workforce. However, the path to become a teacher for those from a non-educational option was quite difficult. We have to sit a placement examination in order to qualify for a one-year Diploma in Education before appointment as a teacher.

The prospect of becoming a teacher had had a great influence on my life. Having a father who was a schoolteacher had also contributed to my passion for embarking on this solemn endeavour. I was so confident that I would pass in that examination. However, the result of the examination left me devastated. It turned out to be completely different from what I expected. I was not in the list of those who succeeded. Frustration engulfed my life. Almost half of my friends were accepted in that selection. I could not believe the fact that I was among the failures. Nonetheless, I grasped a strong hope; I believed that there could be a blessing in disguise. Hence, I grabbed a bit of my courage and set a new direction in my life. I sought for other opportunities and new prospects. Little did I know that the new direction that I chose could lead me to what I am currently doing.

My interest in exploring students' experiences started to grow nine years ago when I was offered a post as a counselling psychology lecturer in a private college in my hometown. The college was rather small in size so I was required to juggle administrative work as well as my academic routine tasks. The students were mostly underachievers and considered among those who were not eligible for enrolling in public university. Their age range was from eighteen to twenty-four. As a lecturer and a counsellor, I needed to be on my toes to come out with the best programme that not only could motivate them but also explored their self-potential and guided them to gain success in the future.

I still remember one of the programmes which left me with unforgettable memories. It was a special programme for underachieving students. At first I was quite puzzled and frantic as to what to do. I started to think about how to handle them. As underachievers, they were not only exhibiting attitude problems but also displaying their resistance to seeking help. I knew at that time I needed to have accommodating skills (Pazaratz, 1998). I needed to think like them with the aim of getting close to them. Deep down in my heart I knew it was challenging to be in their shoes. It was not easy to understand their hardships, let alone to explore their difficulties in study. So the best I could do at that time was to lend my ears and offer my hands to guide them. I discovered that the students were grateful and appreciated the trust and emotional connection established between us. After the success of this programme, I slowly developed my confidence to explore students' hindrances. I learned that they needed someone close to them to share

and understand their situation. This experience had become the source of motivation for me to concentrate on students in difficulties. It taught me to be more empathetic towards others.

My first employment taught me that learning is a never-ending journey. My experiences handling my duties as well as mingling with students taught me the importance of having more skills and knowledge to deal with them. The thirst for knowledge and self-improvement always lingers in my mind. In addition, support from my colleagues and family was among the prime sources of my motivation to further my study. In 2001, I determined to pursue the masters' degree as a part-time student in guidance and counselling in a public university in Malaysia. It was not easy to juggle my studies and perform my job commitment at the same time. Every weekend I needed to pack my things up, ready for the journey. It took me about nine hours' journey by coach to reach the university, which is situated on the West Coast of Malaysia. Sometimes the tiredness that I felt was so immense. During the journey, I drifted into sleep; most of the time when I opened my eyes, I had already reached the destination. I endured the same routine week in and out without fail for about two years of not having enough rest and holidays. Nevertheless, the hardships that I encountered became my inner strength to pursue my future career afterwards.

The journey to my quest continues to grow as the opportunity to upgrade my career arose for me. As soon as I obtained my masters' degree in guidance and counselling, I applied for a post as a counselling lecturer in the Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) in 2004. I was very happy to be accepted among the members of this university. Being the oldest and the only public education university in Malaysia, UPSI supports the Malaysian teacher education and teaching professionalism by offering educational programmes both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is committed to the training of pre-service teachers as well as counsellor-trainees by providing the students with necessary knowledge and hands-on skills. I teach my students not only to make them understand the subject matter. Most importantly, I teach with the aim of facilitating them to be good school counsellors in the future. It is a practice by my university and the Ministry of Education Malaysia that the pre-service teacher or counsellor-trainees are required to undertake 14 weeks of placement in several selected secondary schools across

Peninsular Malaysia. During their fourth year of study, students are expected to transfer all the knowledge that they have gained throughout their studies into a school counselling placement. As a lecturer, I am responsible for keeping them updated with current information pertaining to school counselling issues. Disseminating knowledge about those issues is not merely done through information from textbooks, but also from collaborative activities conducted in school as well as from school counselling supervision. As a lecturer, I needed to equip students with a background understanding on how to work with clients of different cultural backgrounds and deal with multiple aspects of cultural diversity issues in guidance and counselling.

A career as a lecturer in a public university allowed the possibility for me to learn and discover new things. In fact, the quest for understanding students was always at the centre of my attention. The supervisory role of students' placement in secondary schools across Peninsular Malaysia was an enlightening experience for me as I discovered the reality of school counselling. I was startled to see that some school students refused to seek counselling and hesitated to join counselling activities. During one of my visits to school, I discovered that counselling activities were joined only by one group that consisted of excellent students. I was stunned to see a few students loitering outside the counselling unit without any intention of joining the activities. It made me wonder and I started to think about their resistance. Was it considered a taboo to be engaged in those activities? I had also encountered a case where a school counsellor had burst into tears when she was subjected to criticism from teachers. She was blamed for disturbing the classroom's process. Her action of taking students for a counselling session was perceived negatively by the teachers. I had also encountered another occasion where the school counsellor had been placed in a messy storeroom to provide the counselling service. I could feel her agony when she recounted her painful experience dealing with the school community. She had no choice other than cleaning the room by herself.

As I reflected on these incidents, I wondered about the role of the service at school. Did the school community really understand the concept of counselling or did they just take the service for granted? Nevertheless, I also came across a few exceptional situations where school students were happily attached to the school counsellors. Willingly they came for the service and actively participated in the activities conducted. These made



me think about the reasons why these positive attitudes were in place. Why are these cases distinct from the difficulties that I had observed? I wrestled with these issues in my mind and I started to find the answer to solve this puzzle.

A chance to pursue a PhD appeared, and I was blessed and thankful. It presented an opportunity for me to understand this issue that I longed to be answered. As a counsellor educator, I felt responsible for carrying out the research as the outcomes would be considered important for the development of the service in the future. It would at least give me a clearer picture and an opportunity to understand the issues surrounding school counselling.

The next sub-section will describe the background of the study, including a brief description of Malaysia, as the country in which I located my study, followed by a historical overview of the Malaysian education system as well as the position of counselling in that system.

## **Background of the study**

### **Malaysia: The country**

I preferred to conduct the study in my home country, Malaysia. It is known as one of the multi-racial and multi-religious countries in Southeast Asia. As a former British colony, it achieved independence in 1957, and consists of a federation of 13 states which is governed by a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament. Two regions make up the country of Malaysia: West Malaysia where the capital city of Kuala Lumpur is located, bordering Thailand to the north and Singapore to the south, and East Malaysia, made up of two states on either side of Brunei, occupying the northern part of Borneo. My study was conducted in East, or Peninsular, Malaysia.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010), the Malaysian population amounted to 28.3 million. In terms of racial proportion, 63.1 percent are Malays who are Muslims by birth; 24.6 percent are Chinese, who are mainly Buddhists and Taoists with some Christians; 7.3 percent are Indians, who are mainly Hindus; 4.3 percent are indigenous people, who are mainly animists; and 0.7 percent are classified as others.

Islam is the official religion, but freedom of worship is warranted by the constitution. *Bahasa Melayu*, or the Malay language, is considered the official language, while English is widely used in business, education and commerce. Chinese and Indians speak Mandarin and Tamil respectively, while others like *Bumiputera* speak their indigenous languages.

Despite having their own community structures and practising their own traditions, most of the Malaysian cultures have been blended together as a result of socialisation. For example, Malays have adopted some Indian and Chinese traditions like *adat bersanding* (a ceremony whereby the bride and groom wear special dress and sit on a dais) and also the Chinese custom of giving *angpow* (a money gift wrapped in coloured envelopes) to children during the Eid celebration (Melati & Fauziah Hanim, 2008).

In terms of Malaysian cultural values, it would go against my principles and my philosophy to generalise, or to group people racially or according to their specific cultural values. Instead, this brief information is considered a general overview to enable readers to comprehend Malaysian society. According to Asma (1996), common values are found in Malaysian ethnic groups, despite preservation of their own racial identities, and she has listed the following five Malaysian cultural values. First, Malaysians are considered collectivistic, which means a strong sense of attachment and obligations to the group to which one belongs. Second, Malaysians are hierarchical, manifesting respect for parents and elders by avoiding confrontation or going against their wishes. It also involves the concept of filial piety characterised by respect, honour, fidelity, devotion, duty, and sacrifice on the part of children for their parents. Filial piety demands unquestioning obedience as well as concern for and understanding of their needs and wishes. They are taught to uphold values such as politeness (Dahlia, 2008), cooperation (Kennedy, 2002), trust and relationship-building, helpfulness, obedience, and dependence (Mansor, 2010). In the Malaysian ethnic groups, an external locus of control is expected, with the consequence that independence and autonomy are discouraged. Third, Malaysians are relationship-oriented, whereby their lives are embedded in a complex web of family ties, and village, country, or social groups. Mutual and reciprocal obligations are clearly understood and acted upon. Fourth, face, which is “maintaining a person’s dignity by not embarrassing or humiliating him in front of others” is a key to preserving social harmony and personal relationships (Asma,

1996, p.106). Fifth, Malaysians are religious. Happiness comes “from suppressing self-interests for the good of others or discovering it from within oneself through prayers and meditations” (p.106). As group harmony, conformity, and adherence to social conventions are regarded as goals in child socialisation, children appeared to be more socially introverted compared to children in individualistic cultures (Mastor, Jin, & Cooper, 2000).

However, despite similarities, Malaysia does have distinct cultural and religious heritages. Dahlia (2008) in her study on cultural values of three main races in Malaysia indicated the similarities and distinctiveness of their values. According to her, Malays and Chinese shared the most similar cultural values, namely ambition, filial piety, honesty, knowledge, and trustworthiness. Indians were only similar in their values with Malays in terms of piety, while the Chinese and Indians were similar in their values of rituals and traditions. I consider these values as pre-existing knowledge that may or may not inform my study; this is yet to be discovered throughout my fieldwork.

As a developing country, Malaysia has made significant strides in nation-building by developing its economy and improving the quality of life of its people. One of the national strategic measures to achieve a developed country by the year 2020 is to strengthen economic and human capital. This involves a holistic approach to human capital development and training which has been adopted to encompass not only knowledge, but also ethical values, a progressive mindset and cultural awareness. This is in accordance with Chapter Five of National Mission in the Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011- 2015)<sup>1</sup> that is to develop and retain a first-world talent base. This includes the plan to revamp the education system to significantly raise students’ outcomes, raise the skills of Malaysians to increase employability, and reform the labour market to transform Malaysia into a high-income nation. These plans indicate continuous efforts made by the Malaysian government to improve and upgrade the economy and quality of life of Malaysian people (Economic Planning Unit, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive blueprint of government budget allocation for every five years

## **Historical overview of education in Malaysia**

Since the school guidance and counselling service is placed under the Malaysian education system, I regard it is appropriate for me to explain briefly about the history of the education system in Malaysia. This will provide the reader with a background understanding of the education system in Malaysia as well as the position of school counselling in that system. The education system in Malaysia can be divided into five periods: Pre-Independent Years (1900-1956), Pre-British, Pre-World War II, Pre-Independence, and Post-Independence as illustrated by Norzaini and Abdul Razaq (2006), and Rosnani (1996).

### **Pre-British period (prior to 1824)**

The development of education in Malaysia started from the wide spread of Islam since the fourteenth century. The influence of religion and local culture was reflected in non-formal learning such as Quranic teaching (religious), good behaviour, morality, spiritual knowledge at a local mosque or systematic religious education at the *pondok* school on a full-time basis. Besides religious education, other forms of learning include training in martial arts and craftsmanship in fine and intricate skill of making gold, silver and brassware jewellery as well as *songket* (embroidered cloth) weaving and *batik making* (painted cloth).

### **Pre-World War II period (1824-1941)**

The British occupation of Malaysia during this period transformed the goal of education to the imposition of an external culture and value system. This was evidenced in the adoption of the English education system by the British during the occupation. Besides English, education was also available in three other languages: Malay, Chinese and Tamil. This was in part due to the British colonial policy of 'divide and rule'. They had formed four separate vernacular school systems that served different purposes in order to retain their power in the country at that time.

### **Pre-independence period (1941-1957)**

The occupation by the Japanese military in Malaysia during this period (1941-1946) brought about a slight change in the education scenario. There was the addition of the Japanese language to the primary vernacular schools for Malays and Indians. However, Chinese and English schools were replaced with the Japanese Nippon-Go schools that consisted of a Japanese curriculum such as the teaching of Nippon-Go, and Japanese folk songs and culture. Besides that, a number of technical schools and colleges were set up as a replacement for secondary school education. They catered for studies in telecommunications, fisheries, agriculture and building.

Norzaini and Abdul Razaq (2006) stated that the effect of increasingly settled immigrant communities and the emergence of Malay nationalism brought into focus the complexity of the education system in later years. Education was considered essential for Malay communities to hold their own system. Their force for educational opportunities led the Barnes Report to be published in 1951. This had an effect on the whole education system with the introduction of inter-racial bilingual schools with either English or Malay as the main language of instruction. The vernacular schools in Malay, Chinese, and Tamil were to be gradually transformed into national schools by introducing national streams.

The Barnes Report produced fear in Chinese and other community groups that this proposal would eliminate their languages and culture. Hence, the Fenn-Wu Report was set up with the recommendation for the preservation and improvement of Chinese schools in Malaysia. However this effort prompted debates among Malays. Therefore, the Education Ordinance of 1952 was set up as reconciliation for both parties. The major features of this ordinance were the promotion of a national school system by the introduction of national language classes into Malay, Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools. It also recommended the maintenance of the existing English national-type schools. Furthermore, religious education was recommended to be provided as part of school lessons.

The year 1959 marked a milestone in the evolution of a national system of education. The report of the Education Committee, commonly referred to as the Razak Report,

recommended the introduction of common content syllabuses and the compulsory study of the national and English languages in all primary and secondary schools. These efforts were aimed to orient pupils with a Malaysian outlook, to inculcate patriotism, and to foster mutual understanding among Malaysians irrespective of race and religion. In terms of infrastructure, it recommended that equal grants and training facilities be provided to all schools. It also provided the opportunity to all ethnic groups for secondary schools promotion and the conversion of existing primary schools to national schools (Malay medium) and national-type schools (English, Chinese and Tamil medium).

### **Post-independence years (after 1957-1979)**

The major aim for the nation at this time was to build and develop the country. This was clearly stated in the First (1965), Second (1971-1975) and Third (1976-1980) Malaysia Plans which emphasised upgrading the quality of education and training as a major part of the national agenda for the purpose of nation-building, universal literacy and economic goals. Various efforts had been made to achieve this mission. These include the review of the Education Act 1961 and 1963 that consisted of upgrading and enhancing the education system. This included imposing compulsory education at primary level<sup>2</sup>, making promotion up to Form III (age 14-15 years old) of secondary<sup>3</sup> level, having an assessment examination at Standard V (age 10-11 years old), improving vernacular primary schools, enhancing technological and vocational education, the introduction of Bahasa Malaysia as the main language of instruction, the establishment of an official language for public examinations, the expansion of teacher training programmes, and the provision of religious and moral instruction. In order to maximise the potential and skills among youth, other institutions were established, like

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<sup>2</sup> Primary education consists of six years of education, referred to as Year 1 to Year 6 (also known as Standard 1 to Standard 6).

<sup>3</sup> Secondary school education consists of two divisions; the Lower secondary level and Upper Secondary level. The lower secondary level consists of form 1 to Form III while upper secondary education covers two years from Form IV to Form V in which students are channelled into different streams notably arts and science based from the Form III evaluation. (See appendix 6 for school grades and education structure in Malaysia).

technical and vocational institutes, to provide opportunities for those who were not qualified for entry to institutions of higher learning. This period also saw the introduction of guidance and counselling into the educational system (see later section on the emergence of counselling in Malaysia).

### **The progressive years (1980-1999)**

These years cover the Fourth and Fifth Malaysia Plans, which aimed to expand and increase the quality of education to meet manpower requirements and economic policy objectives. The Fifth Malaysia Plan was devised to promote national unity as well as fostering innovation, knowledge and training in science and technology in order to meet the needs of all Malaysians, as well as producing a balanced Malaysian community. The nineties cover the Sixth and Seventh Malaysian Plans with the aim of producing individuals who were not only knowledgeable but also have strong moral and ethical values. At the same time, it aimed to improve the economy as well as the social situation to achieve a developed nation by the year 2020. These periods had put more concentration on technology to boost the nation's economic growth.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> century (2000-2005)**

The increasing globalisation and liberalisation as well as the rapid development of technology and ICT (information and communication technology) changed the National Vision Policy (NVP) to prioritising growth and strengthening economic resilience as well as maintaining unity among people. Thus the government had given a high priority to vocational education and skills training in order to generate a sufficient skilled, efficient and knowledgeable workforce.

Looking at the movements from those periods, I could observe an enormous achievement attained by the education system in Malaysia. It has developed tremendously from an informal learning to a more structured and formal learning system. I consider that these improved qualities of the education system indicated the government emphasis on upgrading the value of the education system in Malaysia. In addition, various Acts and Policies that were introduced in the system signify a

continuous effort to provide better educational opportunities for all people in Malaysia. However, in becoming a developed nation by the year 2020, Malaysia does not only need intellectuals or technocrats to fulfil the aim. It also requires all-round students who are not only knowledgeable but also balanced physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual beings. In order to develop human capital and productivity, great effort needs to be made to mould young Malaysians to achieve this aim. The choice of education as the key building of a strong nation is seen to be in line with this aim. However, the process is not merely confined to the classroom experiences alone. Instead, it should be assisted by other means of services in school. Hence, the designation of full-time status for school counsellors in 2002 is considered relevant and in line with the National Education Philosophy to produce a well-balanced society.

*Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals, who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large.*

(Ministry of Education Malaysia, <sup>4</sup>2009)

In the following section, I will present the overview of the historical background of school guidance and counselling in Malaysia. It will give the readers a sense of understanding about the history and position of the service in the Malaysian education system.

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<sup>4</sup>The ministry handles matters pertaining to pre-school, primary school, secondary school and post-secondary school.



## **The emergence of counselling in Malaysia**

I consider that it would be appropriate for me to describe the evolution of the service in chronological order. This will provide a clear understanding of the movement of counselling and its position in the Malaysian education system as well as the problems surrounding its acceptance and implementation.

According to See and Ng (2010), there is substantial growth and change in the evolution of counselling services in Malaysia. The services were introduced to the Malaysian educational system in the 1960s. The implementation of the service was attributable to the government emphasis on education through the introduction of the national education system. At that time, the service revolved around vocational and educational guidance in secondary schools, whereby students needed proper guidance to develop realistic vocational aspirations, according to the availability and demands in the labour market. Specifically, school counsellors were required to prepare students to achieve successful results in examinations to be considered eligible to enter the workforce. There were two major examinations that students needed to go through in secondary school (see Appendix 6 for grades in secondary school in Malaysia), namely SRP (Sijil Rendah Pelajaran) (currently known as PMR- Penilaian Menengah Rendah) for form 3 students – age 15 years old and SPM (Sijil pelajaran Malaysia for form 5- age 17 years old). The latter exam will determine whether students qualify for higher education. Therefore, in 1960, the Ministry of Education issued a circular letter entitled “Guidance for Careers” which emphasised the importance of vocational guidance in school and the need for career-teachers. Hence, in 1962, the service of Mr. Russell M. Mackenzie, a Colombo Plan Guidance Consultant from Canada, was obtained to advise the Ministry of Education on the establishment of a school guidance service and to set up a guidance unit in the Ministry of Education, as well as in every state education department. Thus, a six-month course in guidance and counselling for school organisers and assistant organisers from all 11 states in Malaysia was developed in 1963 with the aim of training and conducting in-service courses in guidance and counselling for teachers in schools. In the same year there was also a substantial effort made by the Ministry of Education to formulate a policy that all secondary schools should initiate guidance services.

Hence, more systematic planning was undertaken to improve and upgrade the service following the action. Many workshops and seminars were conducted to train the appointed guidance teachers.

The guidance movement also gained momentum following the establishment of the Guidance Section under the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia in 1966. The efforts started with the idea of having career-teachers in the primary and secondary schools in the same year (Awang, as cited in See, 1996). This was followed with the preparation of school bulletins and an explanation of the guidance concept in primary schools. This consisted of information on the cumulative record cards, school orientation, understanding the individual child, and problems of transition to secondary schools. In order to disseminate information about the service, the section also published and circulated a series of bulletins on career guidance. It also organised visits to school for the purpose of monitoring the service as well as carrying out research projects and organising seminars and courses for career-teachers (Awang, as cited in See, 1996).

From 1968, this section conceptualised guidance as a helping process to enable individuals to make intelligent choices and adjustments based on the democratic principle. It was in accordance with the education provision to stimulate and inculcate students' gradual development and ability to make decisions independently (Ministry of Education, 1968, cited in See, 1996). In the early years of its implementation, the focus of guidance was more on vocational and academic aspects. However, in 1971, the function was expanded with the introduction of individual counselling using relevant psychological skills and knowledge to assist clients with appropriate methods.

The guidance and counselling service was also expanded from national schools to fully residential schools throughout Malaysia. On 27th September 1973, administrative circular letter KP 8548/1/ (25) was sent to all fully residential schools throughout Malaysia to inform headmasters that two teachers from every residential school had been trained in educational guidance and were expected to work together with their headmasters to set up a guidance programme in the school. Headmasters were also required to provide facilities such as a separate room for the counselling session and a noticeboard for the guidance programme to be fully utilised by both pupils and teachers.

The need for the service was getting more relevant when the drug problem became a serious threat to the nation in the 1970s. Hence the service was ameliorated to combat drug abuse among teenagers. Three important issues on drug abuse were highlighted in the circular sent to headmasters and guidance teachers. They included the information to detect students' involvement with drugs, actions to be taken, and the laws concerning dangerous drugs.

In the same year, the Ministry of Education also introduced the review of the National Education Policy in 1979, that stressed the importance of widening the guidance concept from career guidance to students' developmental and psychological concepts. It was seen as relevant to the government's aspirations to achieve national unity. In response to these suggestions, the Ministry of Education emphasised the four main objectives of guidance and counselling in school. They include developing students' abilities and potential by conducting growth and enrichment activities, providing prevention from misconduct, indiscipline, drug abuse and addiction, offering corrective measures to various personal, social and educational problems, and conducting a crisis counselling service for those who needed it.

Later, in 1980, a systematic programme to train guidance counsellors and counselling teachers had gained momentum and was being streamlined. Many courses and seminars were held to inform teachers on various aspects of guidance and counselling skills and services. In January 1980, the Specialist Teachers Training Institute (STTI) introduced a one-year certificate course in guidance and counselling. The objective of this one-year course was to prepare teachers as qualified guidance counsellors in secondary schools. The syllabus was designed to enable participants to respond to students' cognitive and affective needs. The training was specially designed for teachers who have the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE), now known as SPM or Higher School Certificate (HSC) STPM. On a similar note, in June 1980, the National University of Malaysia introduced a diploma programme in guidance and counselling for teachers with a basic degree. However, this effort had little impact on acceptance of the service. Qualified guidance counsellors from both institutions were nevertheless posted back to schools to teach. Their qualifications as trained counsellors unfortunately were not often recognised by headmasters. They were given the same workload as ordinary teachers. As a result, these qualified guidance teachers formed a pressure group to fight for their

identities and rights through the teachers' organisation and other political channels. Under the circumstances, the Ministry of Education in 1982 was forced to send yet another administrative letter (KP (PP) 0050/117/JLD.2 (1) indicating the allocation of guidance teachers for every school. Secondary schools with less than 20 classrooms would have one guidance teacher, and secondary schools with 35 classrooms would have two guidance teachers. Those schools with more than 36 classrooms would have three guidance teachers, vocational schools would have one guidance teacher, and technical schools would have two guidance teachers. The guidance teachers' teaching workloads were limited to 12 academic periods in a week. These allocations of guidance teachers were continued until 1987.

Subsequently, a circular letter had increased the need for trained counsellors. Continuous support had been given by government to providing courses and training professional personnel in the 1980s. In 1982, the Specialist Teacher Training Institute (STTI) introduced an eight-week in-service training programme for teachers appointed as guidance teachers to help them to carry out their duties at school. In 1984, those teachers who had already been trained for eight weeks were given a chance to attend a six-month certificate course in the same institutions for in-depth study.

I learned that across consecutive years following its establishment, counselling in Malaysia has gained its major milestone towards professionalism and legitimacy. This was reflected in the creation of PERKAMA (Persatuan Kaunseling Malaysia or Malaysian Counsellors Association) in 1982 by a group of school counsellors. As an association body, PERKAMA regularly organises counselling training workshops and conferences. Later, in 1998, the Parliament of Malaysia enacted the Counsellor Act 1998 (Act 580; Commissioner of Law Revision and *Percetakan Nasional Berhad*, 2006) to regulate the practice of professional counselling. About 1749 counsellors were registered with the Board, of which 1219 were licensed at that time. Besides, there is also a Board of Counsellors; a formal body regulated for the purpose of certification of professional counsellors. Besides, it also responsible for the procedures of training and accreditation standards for counselling programmes and practices (Sapora, 2007).

From the 1990s to the present, I observed a steady increase in training supported by local universities and the Malaysian government. Up until now, many public universities, including UPM, USM, UKM, UPSI, UM and UTM, have been offering

guidance and counselling courses, starting from undergraduate level up to postgraduate training.

I further acknowledge that the position of guidance and counselling services in primary and secondary schools was later alleviated with the endorsement of full-time status based on the agreement through a dialogue ceremony held with the Minister of Education on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1996. It was officially started on 1st June 1996. Beginning from August 1996, a group of first batch teachers who held a degree, diploma and certificate in guidance and counselling were assigned as full-time guidance and counselling teachers in every secondary school. The employment warrant of the full-time status was designated on 11th January 2002 (No KP (PP) 0050/SJ B Jld24/ (24)) which means that the employment must be fulfilled specifically based on the approved remuneration scheme. The ratio prescribed for school counsellors in each school would be one counsellor for 500 pupils (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2009).

Three main areas have been emphasised in guidance and counselling services since 1996 (Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas, Bil. 3/1996). They comprise academic (choosing subjects, study skills and placement), career (career interest inventory and education and development of career) and psychosocial and mental health (personality development, psychosocial skills, and personality development). School counsellors are given a list of 24 tasks as follows:

- a) Preparation of annual plan and activities for guidance and counselling.
- b) Identification of the needs of the students.
- c) Planning and management of the records and reports of the students.
- d) Gathering, preparation and publicity of counselling information.
- e) Discharging of group guidance and counselling, and instructional base activities to motivate maximum development.
- f) Planning and discharge of individual counselling.
- g) Planning, performance and management of study skills programmes.
- h) Planning, performance and management of programmes to help students select subjects for the government examinations.

- i) Planning, performance and management of educational programmes against drug, alcohol, and smoking abuse.
- j) Assistance to students to continue with higher education.
- k) Planning, performance, and management and evaluation of consultation and referral services related to career and drugs.
- l) Planning, performance, management and evaluation of conferences with parents, teachers, support staff and government agencies, related to the process of education and development of students.
- m) Preparation of modules, instruments and approaches to promote professionalism in guidance and counselling.
- n) Planning, coordination and evaluation of guidance and counselling resources.
- o) Setting up committees to coordinate the guidance and counselling services.
- p) Advocating for and provision of in-house training to share understanding of the guidance and counselling services.
- q) Provision of crisis counselling to students, teachers, staff and anyone else who needs the services.
- r) Holding the role as a mediator between the school and outside agencies.
- s) Holding a position in the curriculum committee.
- t) Holding a position in the school planning committee.
- u) Role as facilitator in the mentor-mentee programme.
- v) Position as facilitator in the development programmes such as motivation camp, civic education etc.
- w) Carrying out programmes related to drug prevention education.
- x) Carrying out programmes related to HIV/AIDS prevention programmes.

(Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2009)

Looking at the counsellors' roles mentioned above, I could deduce that counsellors carry such diverse and comprehensive roles as they cater for the whole students'

development and school's needs. At the same time, I wonder whether they can perform all these tasks successfully. This is yet to be discovered in my thesis.

Since the implementation of full-time school counsellors, many courses have been introduced to enhance and expose teachers to the service. Beginning in 2001, the Teachers' Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia, in collaboration with the Aminuddin Baki Institute (IAB) had conducted a course for six months to fill in the empty space allocated for the full-time school counsellors in secondary schools.

Besides that, I learned that the effort of recruiting school counsellors into the service had also been strengthened. This includes identifying teachers who were eligible for conducting the service. In October 2001, the Teachers' Division Unit in collaboration with the Institute of Teacher Education throughout Malaysia had conducted a 14-week course for guidance teachers in primary schools. The course was aimed at giving exposure and guidance to the role of full-time guidance teachers. Consequently, in September 2002, the first batch of primary school teachers was appointed as full-time school counsellors. This was followed later in January 2005 by the first batch of trainee teachers majoring in guidance and counselling being appointed as full-time school counsellors in primary schools across Malaysia. This appointment has resulted in the reviewing of roles and working hours among school counsellors. They are no longer given teaching tasks so they can perform their duties fully for about eight hours daily.

Guidance and counselling in Malaysia is also experiencing greater acceptance and support from the Ministry of Education with the allocation of a specialised division to handle the service. In March 2009, the guidance and counselling service was positioned under the Counselling and Discipline Management Sector.

Looking back at the movement of school counselling in Malaysia, I consider that the services have been demonstrating tremendous growth and receiving lots of support from the government. Besides obtaining allocated funds, the services are also being systematically managed and placed under specific governing divisions. Moreover, new courses and syllabi in counselling and guidance programmes are actively being developed, monitored and upgraded in public universities and higher institutions to provide the latest knowledge, skills and exposure to all trainee counsellors. Furthermore, the establishment of Counsellors Acts and PERKAMA as an association

body for counsellors signify a solid landmark for the counselling profession in Malaysia. These commitments indicate the government's apprehension on the importance of the service and its benefit to the Malaysian people.

### **Problems facing the implementation of counselling**

Despite many efforts that have been made to uphold the service, there are many problems facing its implementation. I found that the issue of students' reluctance to accept school guidance and counselling is not only encountered by me but also has been experienced nationally. It has been regarded as a long-term problem since its introduction in the 1960s. Although many studies have been conducted to explore and investigate students' attitudes towards counselling in Malaysia, there is no effective measure taken to understand the issue. There seems to be an endless cycle to this problem. As I scrutinise previous local findings related to the issue, I found that most of the studies revolved around quantitative measures of students' attitudes with little attention to understanding concerns within students and school communities' contextual situation.

Several issues have been raised relating to students' values and attitudes towards the service. Abdul Halim (1996) and Sabora (2007) argue that the concept of counselling exists in tension with the functions of traditional helpers like family and friends, who value the importance of being directive and interdependent. The emphasis by counsellors on autonomy, personal responsibility and expression of feelings seems to be different from Malaysian traditions that are considered collectivistic in nature and value self-control. Furthermore, the use of counselling models which originated in the United States – such as client-centred therapy, rational emotive behavioural therapy (REBT), and reality therapy, to name a few – that emphasise individuality, seem to contradict the Malaysian cultural values that stress interdependence. Besides that, Mansor (2010) argues that mandated or compulsory counselling practised in Malaysian schools, universities, rehabilitation centres, government and private agencies and in court-ordered cases could contribute to reluctant attitudes when they are not conducted within the therapeutic boundary of counselling. Mansor relates this issue to the collectivistic



nature of the Malaysian community that emphasises respect for authority, a need to 'save face', directives from top authority and values of we-ness.

Another issue affecting individual attitudes towards counselling is related to their attitudes towards the service. Studies by Rafidah and Suradi (2005) revealed that Malaysian university students did not consider seeking professional psychological help as a way of resolving their problems. Several reasons have been identified. They include students' limited knowledge of counselling, a lack of awareness regarding the severity of problems, cultural issues, gender, and stigma associated with psychological problems. I observed that these problems did not occur in tertiary education only, but were also experienced at the secondary level. Aida et al. (2010) found that the barriers to under-utilisation of primary care services for mental health problems among adolescents in one secondary school in Malaysia were also due to limited knowledge and awareness of the availability of the service for them in the community. They indicated that 77.7 percent of students preferred friends, 60 percent and 48 percent of them referred to parents and siblings respectively, while formal sources such as counselling was the least preferred, with about 3.4 percent. These findings indicate that the level of knowledge, awareness and acceptance towards counselling services are still fairly low among students.

Glamcevski and Tome (2008) also indicated that although there were apparent symbols of professionalism in counselling with the establishment of PERKAMA and Counsellor Act 580, they have had little impact on the practice of counselling in Malaysia. Interviews conducted with four prominent counsellors in Malaysia indicated that Malaysian people are still influenced by a negative stigma associated with counselling. There was apparent misunderstanding between the concept of mental health and counselling. Besides that, counsellors' minimal qualifications, experience and supervision, as well as a lack of adequate assessment to equip students with career guidance, were seen to be a hindrance to counselling acceptance. In addition, counselling approaches mainly based on Western models were seen as incompatible with the Malaysian culture that emphasises advice-giving.

These foregoing problems generally revolve around negative attitudes towards the service. Since an individual is culturally mediated, I regard it as a need for me to understand and explore in detail the aspect of cultural values inherent in participants' lives.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of my research is to explore and understand, within a narrative conceptual framework, the aspect of cultural values inherent in the life of students and school communities, and how these influence their appreciation of guidance and counselling services. Despite many local studies addressing this issue, I discern that there is no clear understanding of students and school communities' valuing of school counselling as there is no thorough explanation given for the establishment of their values and attitudes. I consider that counselling is an important aspect of education and in a multi-cultural context there is great interest in wanting to understand the students' cultural values and how their attitudes may affect the efficiency of providing therapeutic learning through counselling.

Initially, my study intended to explore the cultural values of three different groups of students existing in school. I was eager to understand each of their values in relation to seeking counselling. I anticipated that the distinctive values among these three racial groups might carry certain influence on their attitudes towards the service. However, having constructivism-interpretivism as my philosophical paradigm made me consider this biased thinking. Furthermore, practicing reflexivity (Hertz, 1997; McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007; Mcbeth, 2001) throughout the research process allowed me to reframe my research questions and consequently redirected the focus of my research.

## **Research questions**

The inspiration to formulate the research questions was not only derived from my personal experiences, but also arose out of previous literature (which will be discussed in the next chapter). Studies exploring the attitudes towards seeking psychological help in higher education such as Goh et al. (2007), Suradi (2010), Barksdale and Molock (2008), Yeap (2008), Nguyen and Anderson (2005), Yoo, Goh and Yoon (2005), Boldero and Fallon (1995), and Setiawan (2006), as well as Zuria and Jazimin (2008), Cooper, Hough and Loynd (2007), Hui (2002) and Sidek et al. (2005) on guidance and counselling services in secondary school have provoked me to explore the issue in great depth within participants' contextual setting. Furthermore, my aim is also to fill the gap left by these aforementioned studies as they were mostly done using quantitative measures. This has initiated the formation of my Research Question 2.

Besides that, my research approaches, which involved the interactive and responsive processes with the participants in the local setting, had influenced the way I generated new questions and refined my initial ones (see research question 1).

In addition, there were amendments done to the previous research questions. Initially, I only included students and school counsellors as the main participants. As the study unfolded (the process will be discussed in Chapter 3) my research questions became more directed and relevant to the local groups. It prompted me to ask the parallel questions to other school communities such as teachers and school administrators. My aims were not only to understand the participants' contexts better, but also to comprehend their own distinctive perspective on school as well as counselling services. Hence, this process prompted me to formulate more specific questions that were basically constructed based on the emerging data.

I used the 'what' questions (Creswell, 1998) which represent the exploratory, while 'how' questions address explanatory aspects of the research. They were generated to search for the meaning understood by the participants.

### **Research question 1:**

- 1.0 What are the typical cultural values and attitudes of students in school?
- 1.1 How do the students report their values and experiences of school and what explanations do they offer to explain their values and experiences of school?
- 1.2 How do the school communities (school counsellors, schoolteachers, and school administrators) explain students' cultural values as well as their own values and experiences in school?

### **Research question 2:**

- 2.0 What are the school community's (students, school counsellors, schoolteachers, school administrators) values of counsellors, and the guidance and counselling services in this school?
- 2.1 How do the school community (students, school counsellors, schoolteachers and school administrators) explain their values and attitudes in relation to counsellors and the guidance and counselling service in this school?

Hence, in accordance with the philosophical hermeneutics in a constructivist-interpretivist framework, my study seeks to explore the meanings behind their values whether or not to seek counselling can be interpreted in terms of cultural values, and how cultural values and attitudes can be used to interpret perception of guidance and counselling by the participants.

### **Needs for the study**

School is considered a unique place that can provide required support for addressing multiple aspects of students' diversity, including race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, at-risk students and underachievers (Yeh, 2003). In the Malaysian

context, school is regarded as a platform for unity among different racial backgrounds (Sapora, 2007). It is also a place specifically to inculcate knowledge, values and morality to produce well-rounded students. The existence of guidance and counselling services in every school has been regarded as the catalyst to achieve these proposed aims. However these efforts will be hampered if the acceptance of the counselling service is withheld or only partial. Hence research that focuses on views of school counselling is much-needed to understand students and school communities' voices as well as their needs of the service.

I chose to explore the school community's experiences to enable them to give voice to their own opinions and needs. This is because most of the research conducted previously had been based on the empirical studies that had placed little emphasis on participants' voices. According to Giroux (1992, p.158) "they (participants) have been silenced all their lives". Giving due attention to students, as well as the school communities' voices, will help me to attend to and understand their perspectives better. I consider the medium of research can be a good platform for me to reach into the participants' worlds. This allows me to embrace "the political potential of speaking out on their own behalf" (Lewis, 1993, p.44).

I regard it as important for school counsellors to understand adolescents and school communities' attitudes and expectations towards counselling services. Gerstein, Rountree and Ordonez (2007) argue that most counsellors are still embracing an individual lens in the helping process and tend to indirectly ignore the cultural aspect embedded in the client's life. Therefore, comprehending students' voices and the school communities' understanding and needs is essential, because it can provide counsellors with insights into understanding the role of helping in the client's culture.

Hence, an exploration of cultural values from the school communities' perspective will facilitate better understanding of their attitudes, reveal their opinions of counsellors and counselling programmes from their cultural perspectives, and will enable a description of multi-cultural value patterns to be formed which will help explain any commonalities and differences in their perception of counselling services.

## **Organisational structure for the thesis**

As I went through my research journey and data analysis, there were accumulations of insightful stories and experiences rendered by different participants in the school community. Hence, the layout for my thesis is based on the responses derived across different groups of participants within the school community. It is divided into ten chapters as described below.

**This first chapter** introduces my aims and motivation to embark on the study. I also include the background information of the study including an overview of the Malaysian education system as well as the historical background and position of counselling in the system. In addition, local problems concerning counselling services as well as research questions are also discussed in this chapter.

**In Chapter 2**, I present the key concepts that provide the basis for understanding the issue. I also include the review of related literature on past research conducted locally and internationally. Differences in foci, setting, methodologies and approaches presented in the past literatures became the basis of knowledge and insights for my intended study.

**Chapter 3** highlights social constructivism/constructionism as a paradigm that underpins my study. This paradigm complements the use of the ethnographic narrative case study approach as my chosen methodology. In addition, I also discuss the choice of my research participants, as well as the setting for my study.

**Chapter 4: 'My ethnographic endeavour – Entering the unknown'** discusses my journey embarking into the participants' cultural worlds. It includes the processes of self-negotiation and identity formation, as well as my role as an outsider and insider in the fieldwork.

The next four chapters are the series of the stories that show my ethnographic representation accounts of my journey throughout three months of research fieldwork.

**Chapter 5**, entitles "Unfolding the tales of the field", describes my experiences embarking on the research process. I also discuss the unanticipated processes which

occurred in the fieldwork, as well as subsequent issues related to my intended research design. Besides, the process of data analysis is also thoroughly discussed in this chapter.

**Chapter 6** illustrates the views and experiences of school students related to the issue. They provided nuances of cultural insights and understandings pertaining to the issue within their respective cultural paradigms.

“The plight of the school counsellor” is the **seventh chapter**, and conveys the experiences and voices of school counsellors. The presentation of four narratives of school counsellors offers insights into understanding the status, role and position of guidance and counselling in the respective schools, as well as counsellors’ identities in the school community.

In **Chapter 8**, I discuss the stories of schoolteachers as a means of understanding their perspectives regarding students’ cultural values as well as their views on school guidance and counselling services.

**The ninth Chapter** ends with the presentation of school administrators’ stories. They provide insights into understanding the school ethos and processes and their relations to values towards guidance and counselling services.

My final chapter, which is **Chapter 10**, reports the summary of the key findings, including a discussion of their implications, limitations, and contributions in order to present recommendations and a conclusion for the study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **GUIDANCE, COUNSELLING, CULTURE, VALUES**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present several key concepts of my study as well as provide an explanation for my research study. These concepts are mainly presented and discussed to explore the possibilities for my research as well as facilitate deeper insights into understanding the issues, which will later generate critical reflections on practice and knowledge of previous work in the area. In this chapter, I shall first explain the key terms and concepts as well as their meaning in relation to the study. Then I will present reviews of the literature pertaining to the issues.

#### **The Concept of Guidance**

I begin the discussion by presenting two key concepts – counselling and guidance – as they become a central focus of my study. Both terms are closely related to each other as they are considered a basis for understanding the counselling service in schools.

The term guidance became prominent in the helping profession in the United States during the late 1950's and 1960's. It dates back to the early 1900s when Parsons established the Vocational Bureau of Boston. Starting from vocational guidance, it became quickly integrated into the school system to provide holistic developmental activities for students (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels & D'Andrea, 2011).

In providing the definition of guidance, I am aware of the distinction between the terms guidance and counselling. McLeod (2007) reminded that these activities are often popularly confused with counselling. According to him, the difference between counselling and guidance revolves around its role and relationship. He conveyed that, counselling is about working collaboratively and actively with a person to understand and resolve the issue while guidance regards a person as a passive recipient of information or guidance.



I find a similar definition has been adopted in the Malaysian school context. Guidance in Malaysian schools refers to the process of helping students to learn and make appropriate choices in which they are given guidance and information to enable them to work progressively to achieve their personal goals. Besides serving for individual students, guidance activities and programmes also cater for a larger group (Myrick, 2001; Othman, 2000). Although the definition of guidance mostly entails providing help for students, it does not force students to actively participate in the programmes. Students are encouraged to participate and offer their opinion towards the betterment of the service.

### **The Concept of Counselling**

I find a degree of agreement among authors, both locally and internationally, concerning the definition of counselling. In the UK context, McGinnis and Jenkins (2006) defined counselling in schools as a process that assists a client to focus on his or her particular concerns and developmental issues, while simultaneously addressing and exploring specific problems, making choices, coping with issues, working through feelings of inner conflict and improving the relationship with others. In other words, counselling enables young people to gain a better understanding of themselves and the situations facing them and to develop strategies to cope with change.

The above definition is supported by McLeod (2003) who emphasised the social and cultural elements in understanding counselling. According to him, counselling not only occurs between the two individuals – counsellor and client – but also includes the social institution and its related culture. On a similar note, Bor, Landy, Gill and Brace (2002) conveyed that counselling is an interactive and collaborative process where the client can be helped to feel understood and better about themselves and their problem. They defined counselling as “an interaction in a therapeutic setting, focusing primarily on a conversation about relationships, beliefs and behaviour (including feelings), through which the child’s perceived problem is elucidated and framed or reframed in a fitting or useful way, and in which new solutions are generated and the problem takes on a new meaning” (p.15). These definitions are in line with the scope of my study, which includes social interaction as one of the components to study participants’ cultural values towards counselling services.

The above views are also in agreement with the views of prominent figures in Malaysia such as Mizan and Halimatun (2006), who concluded that counselling is a helping process conducted by a trained counsellor for the purpose of helping an individual to understand him/her as well his/her environment. This includes the process of helping him/ her to find appropriate alternatives and understand the choices taken.

In a general sense, I found Rogers's statement (as cited in See, 1996) about the importance of looking at guidance and counselling as connected components, to be powerful. He argued that these two terms – guidance and counselling – are vital in the counselling profession as they enhance the client's personal development and psychological growth. Both elements are considered dependent on each other where guidance is regarded as addressing a body while counselling is the soul or heart in which a person's self-understanding occurs. In short, the counselling service is the brain and heart of the guidance programme. It represents a part of the total process of guidance that helps individuals achieve the self-understanding and self-direction necessary to make the maximum adjustment at school, home, and in the community.

As a counsellor educator, I tend to agree with Roger's conception. Both (guidance and counselling) are inseparable units in a school counselling service in Malaysia due to their comprehensive role in enhancing students' skills and development. Besides having counselling services, students have the chance to obtain a range of developmental activities from the guidance programmes available in school. Based on my experience, I have observed that these two terms are used interchangeably by most of the school communities in Malaysia. Although they carry different roles and meanings, most students and the school community tend to view them as akin to each other.

### **The concept of culture and values**

I discern that it is imperative for school counsellors to have an understanding of culture as it affects their way of interpreting the attitude of the clients. As culture involves an elusive and vague concept, it brings considerable challenges for counsellors working with and addressing cultural differences (Jackson and Meadows, 1991). To begin the discussion, it would be appropriate for me to first put a clear view of the definition of culture so that the process of understanding the complexity of its concept can easily be

digested. In an attempt to discuss the broad meaning of culture, I bring the evolutionary concept of culture from the traditional /essentialist and non-essentialist points of view to open the possibilities for my research.

### **Traditional conceptualisations of culture**

In discussing culture, I was informed by Jackson and Meadows (1991) about the evolutionary concepts of culture. Prior to the 1950s, culture was interpreted at the level of sensory observation, whereby the focus was on habits and behaviour. In other words, the focus was on tangible aspects of culture where the deeper aspects of culture remained unacknowledged, thus, limiting the holistic view of culture to be understood in an integrated manner. Subsequently, in the 1960's the focus of culture shifted to certain issues and variables within a dominant culture. It was dominated by ethnographic studies that focused on issues, such as nationality, ethnicity and shared history. However, the focus of culture was still too simplistic and tended to ignore the complexity of individuals and their cross-cultural interactions.

I then observed the evolution of culture exhibited in the Social System Approach by Pederson as cited in Jackson and Meadows (1991), which acknowledges the complexity of individuals and cross-cultural interactions in all people. These include four aspects: a) demographic variables, b) status variables, c) affiliation variables, and d) ethnographic variables. However, the focus of culture still only remained at the surface level. Knowledge of the foundations upon which these variables are based is still lacking. The deep meaning of behaviour is not being given attention.

As I reviewed extensive literature, I found that these conceptions are also shared by different authors, both locally and internationally. Hofstede (2005), for example, who is among the prominent figures in cultural studies, asserted that cultures are physical entities, which can be seen, touched and experienced by others. He interpreted culture through the notions of shared beliefs, values, customs, and meanings, which distinguish one group of people from another. Manifested in patterns of language and thought and in forms of activity and behaviour, culture is transmitted through symbols, artefacts, rituals, heroes, and values. In a similar vein, Asma, Epps and Wan (2000, p. 2) regard

culture as the “collective programming of the mind, body and spirit, which describes a group of people who live in a particular society”. Hence, these traditional conceptualisations of culture tend to define culture as a fragmented view that ignores the uniqueness and differences within individual members of the group.

As I analysed these aforementioned concepts of culture, I found that they are parallel to the concept of essentialism, which is one of the two divisions of culture (essentialism and non-essentialism) in social science, proposed by Holliday (2000). This essentialist view perceives culture as a concrete social phenomenon, which represents the essential character of a particular nation. Although there is also a complex subculture within the essentialist view, it tends to view culture according to the larger national cultures. Hence, the essentialist view tends to reduce and ‘otherise’ and provide an explanation of human attitudes based on simplistic national culture. Moreover, it attempts to fit the behaviour of people into preconceived, constraining structures.

### **The Non-essentialist views of culture**

Unlike the essentialist who views culture objectively, the non-essentialist view defines culture in a more flexible way. According to this approach, culture is a movable concept used by different people at different times to suit purposes of identity, politics and science (Holliday, 2000). In addition, culture is considered a resource for investigating and understanding social behaviour, as it does not limit human beings into certain preconceptions or national cultural characteristics but more on an overall understanding of how culture per se works. According to Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2010, p. 2) the non-essentialist view “focuses on the complexity of culture as a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configurations”. Furthermore, it does not impose pre-definitions of the essential characteristics of specific national cultures. Therefore, it provides a framework for analysis of behaviour.

Despite acknowledging the importance of a non-essentialist in understanding the behaviour of people, I consider myself to be a realist/essentialist in respect of the religious and moral standpoints. I consider that human beings need a proper code of

conduct in terms of moral and religious foundation to guide their behaviour, as without a single, stable reality on which to rely, people tend to feel lost and ungrounded. Being a Muslim, I view my culture as largely connected to religion and moral values. It is regarded as an integrated whole. Culture permeates all aspects of my daily life, as it determines and shapes my actions. I tend to agree with the analogy of culture to the human blood flows by Garcea (2004) who conveyed the vitality of culture to the life of human beings. Despite its unseen character, it undergirds my daily behaviour. My way of life, including how I behave, dress and treat people are basically derived from the traditions of Islam, as prescribed by the *Quran and Sunna*. Both are considered the primary sources of knowledge and guidance. They become the framework for worship and a sign of commitment to the faith. As a Muslim, my behaviour is based on the five pillars of Islam, which include *Syahadah* (declaration of faith), performing prayers five times daily, fasting during Ramadan, almsgiving (practice of charitable giving based on accumulated wealth) and the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime for those who can afford it). Besides these, my life is also greatly influenced by my parents. They are considered influential figures as they nurture in me the importance of religion, and social norms. They teach me and my other eight siblings to adhere strictly to the religious teachings of Islam. They also instil in me moral values including respect and concern for others, especially elders. In addition, they always remind me and my other siblings to uphold the family dignity and never in any way to bring shame to the family members. As a close-knit family, we still practise the concept of *mesyuarah* (group decision making) to solve any problems and to undertake any activities.

Despite my adherence to religion and morality, I still acknowledge the influence of non-essentialism, as I believe in its vitality towards my identity constructions. The experiences and the dynamic process of social interaction that I have gained throughout the course of my life and my career are the sources for my identity constructions. These elements yield uniqueness, and, thus, enrich my value systems.

Since culture encompasses a very general and broad concept, I consider that the concentration on the element of values is vital as they are the most influential part in the cultural component. This is in accordance with Jackson and Meadows (1991) who mentioned that, “a view of culture without reference to its values becomes a meaningless assemblage of items having relation to one another only through

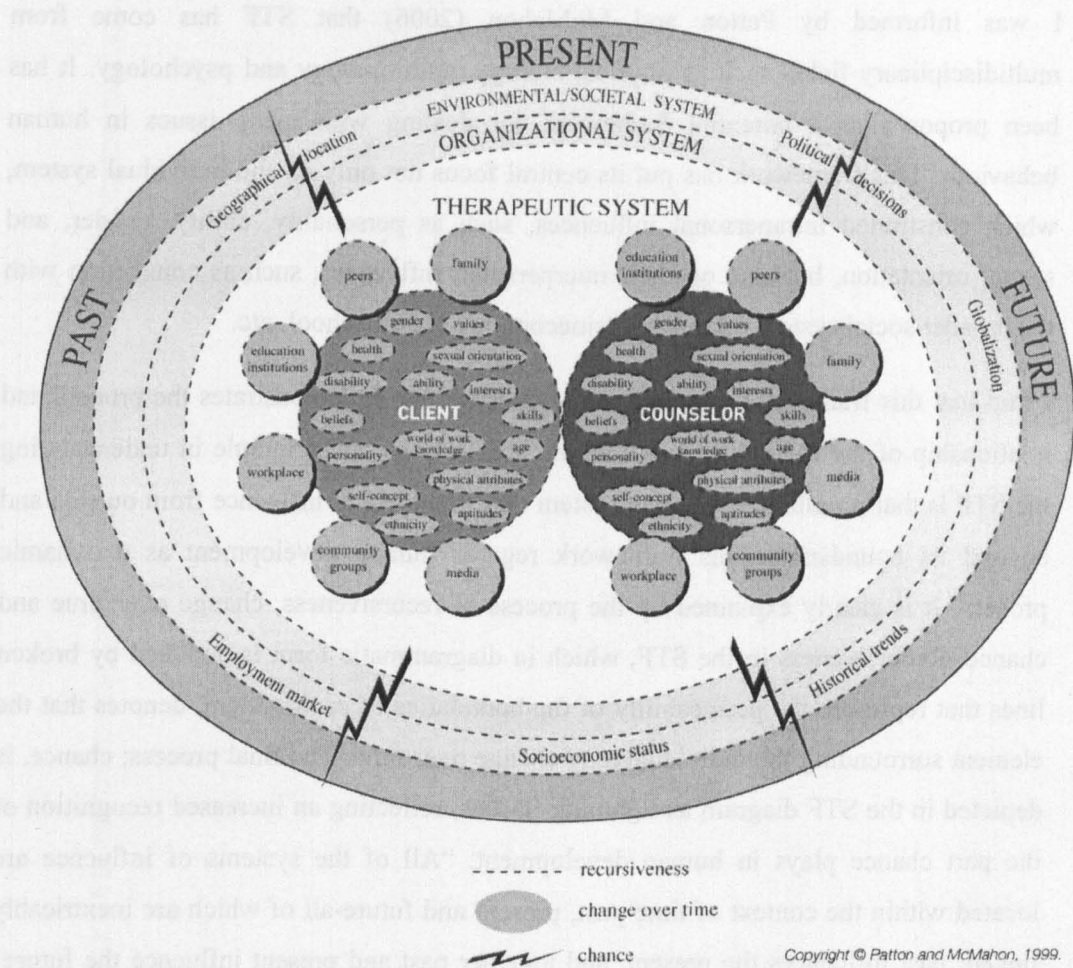
coexistence in locality and moment” (p.73). Furthermore, acknowledging the values of a culture according to them “is an initial attempt to grasp culture as an organised whole and to understand the meanings of behaviours” (p.73).

In addition, values are powerful in explaining the behaviour of individuals in a holistic way. According to the model of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (Hills, 2002), the concept of value orientations includes both normative and existential assumptions. Normative assumption incorporates elements of cognitive (thoughts about life and the universe), affective (what are felt to be important and desirable elements), and conative (inclination towards or selection of a particular course of action) as a system that functions interactively to form a complex set of guiding principles, namely, value orientations. Hence, values are considered powerful as they affect the individual’s overall behaviour. On a similar note, Merriam and Mohamad (2000) mentioned that cultural values are “emotion-laden, internalized assumptions, beliefs, or standards that shape how we interpret our life experiences”. Considered to be more general in character than attitudes, but less general than ideologies, relatively stable features of individuals and societies, they correspond neatly to personality traits and cultural characteristics. These cultural values represent the interplay between the culture and characteristics of individuals and societies that describe and guide their actions. I consider that cultural values encompass comprehensive elements that justify being thoroughly examined and understood in exploring the complexity of human behaviour.

In order to provide a connection to the key concepts presented, I consider having a framework to provide a better understanding of the researched issue. I have chosen the Systems Theory Framework, as it demonstrates the applicability of understanding counselling as a relationship, in particular the role of a counselling service in a setting.

Figure 2.1

Systems Theory Framework



I am indebted to Patton and McMahon (2006) for paving the way for me to find an appropriate framework to understand my study. Both of them have applied the principles of the Systems Theory Framework (STF) into career counselling framework. This framework has challenged traditional career theory in viewing the position of a person in relation to his or her career development. In explaining career development, this systems framework not only places its emphasis on individual characteristics, such as self-concept, personality, belief systems to name but a few, but also includes interpersonal aspects of human beings. Thus, this conception is considered holistic in

viewing the position of an individual in relation to his or her society as it celebrates the importance of both elements; personal and interpersonal in explaining human behaviour.

I was informed by Patton and McMahon (2006) that STF has come from multidisciplinary fields such as physics, biology, anthropology and psychology. It has been proposed as a potential framework for dealing with many issues in human behaviour. This framework has put its central focus not only on the individual system, which constituted intrapersonal influences, such as personality, ability, gender, and sexual orientation, but also on their interpersonal influences, such as connection with the broader social system – family, socioeconomic status, school, etc.

I find that this framework is practical in the sense that it demonstrates the process and relationship of the individual in a system. The fundamental principle in understanding the STF is that it embraces an open system that is subject to influence from outside and beyond its boundaries. This framework regards human development as a dynamic process. It is clearly explained by the process of recursiveness, change over time and chance. Recursiveness in the STF, which in diagrammatic form is depicted by broken lines that represent the permeability of the boundaries of each system, denotes that the element surrounding the individual may change over time. The final process; chance, is depicted in the STF diagram as lightning flashes, reflecting an increased recognition of the part chance plays in human development. “All of the systems of influence are located within the context of time-past, present and future-all of which are inextricably linked; past influences the present, and together past and present influence the future” (p. 154).

Indeed, this framework has given me insights into connecting my wide-ranging ideas into a more coherent whole. The conceptions of an individual in a system demonstrated by STF enable me to explain the nature of human behaviour as a dynamic and fluid process. Through the process of recursiveness and chance, it clearly displays the fluid conception of human interaction. Therefore, this framework gives due consideration to the dynamic elements surrounding human beings in a system that could be helpful at this stage in developing my research and explaining my participants’ cultural values towards the service. Furthermore, this framework may open up the possibilities to



narrow down my understanding concerning this issue. These elements will recur as a point of reference in understanding literatures pertaining to the issue.

## **Review of related literatures**

My literature reviews have taken into consideration literature pertaining to cultural values and help seeking in counselling. Help-seeking, according to Barker (2007, p. 1), “is the use of formal supports which can be defined as health facilities, youth centres, formal social institutions or professional care providers, either in the public or private sector. In many cases, “help-seeking” is used interchangeably with “health-seeking,” which generally refers more narrowly to seeking services or remedies for a specific ailment or illness. In many of the documents cited in the bibliography, “help-seeking” refers to the use of health and other services in the case of severe or serious mental health issues, including substance use, depression and suicide. In only a few cases in the literature is the term “help-seeking” used in a more comprehensive way to refer to the use of both formal supports and informal supports, which includes family, kinship networks, friends, traditional healers and/or religious leaders”. Considering the wide scope of help-seeking types presented above, my literature only concentrated on help-seeking towards professional psychological help (guidance and counselling) either in higher education or in secondary schools, as it is parallel to the scope of my study. My intention of including the higher education scope is because I would like to see the issue with an open mind, as it could provide me with a background understanding from a wider perspective.

My literature review takes into account two major areas: a) Cultural values and the help-seeking process and b) Cultural values and the perception of counsellors and counselling services. A review of the literature on cultural values and the help-seeking process provides a context in an effort to understand the role of cultural values in determining an individual’s attitude, perception, and behaviour of whether or not to seek help. The perception of counsellors and counselling services are examined to

provide an understanding of the participants' cultural values towards counsellors and counselling services, which may impede or encourage the counselling process.

### **Cultural values and help seeking process**

Values in the counselling process encompass four aspects: a) the counsellor's cultural background, b) the client's cultural background, c) the assumptions that are made by both the counsellor and the client regarding the presenting problem, and d) the values imposed on the counselling relationship through the opportunities and restrictions of the institutional setting in which the counselling is being carried out (Pederson, Loner, and Draguns as cited in Carter (1991). In exploring the cultural values of participants, I shall concentrate on these four aspects as I regard them as relevant to my intended study. I shall explore both counsellors and clients' cultural values and their perceptions related to the service. Then, I shall focus on their perceptions and experiences of meeting each other as well as their perceived overall views and experiences of the respective school communities towards the service.

In reviewing the selected literature, I was taken by surprise as most of these issues focused on higher education (Setiawan, 2006; Vogel & Wei, 2005; Wallace & Constantine, 2005; Vogel, Wade & Hackler, 2007; Pope-Davis et al. 2002). Their findings will be highlighted in the next few paragraphs. Despite the many issues in multicultural counselling research and practice in schools, the current literature in Counselling Psychology does not reflect school-aged populations. In scrutinising the past three years of the *Journal of Counselling and Psychology*, Yeh (2004) mentioned that less than six percent of published empirical articles focused on school-aged samples and even fewer of these studies were in a school context. According to her, this trend is basically because of the distinction between the curriculum in the academic degree of Counselling Psychology and School Counselling in the United States. Little research was found in School Counselling where students were not required to do their research project and dissertations, while doctoral students majoring in Counselling Psychology rarely focus their dissertation on school-aged populations. I have observed a similar scenario in Malaysia where many researchers have concentrated on multicultural counselling issues concerning higher levels of education (Tajudin, 2008; Rusnani, Poh & Asmah, 2008; See, 2005; Suradi, 2010).

In an attempt to find related literature, I extended my search beyond the field of Counselling Psychology. I then found a plethora of studies (Goh et al., 2007; Gamst et al., 2004; Shechtman, Hiradin & Zina, 2003; Ringel, 2005; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2007; Cheung, 2005; Raviv, Raviv & Wilansky, 2000; Bui & Takeuchi, 1992; Riet & Knoetze, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005; Fallon & Bowles, 2001) that are related to the role of culture in the attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help among secondary school students and adolescents through various journals; for example, the Journal of Adolescence, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Black Psychology, Journal of Youth and Adolescence and Journal of Community Psychology. Their findings will be explained in the next few paragraphs.

In finding and directing the scope of cultural values and help-seeking in counselling, I have considered various models of adolescent mental health help-seeking proposed by Cauce et al. (2002) and Saunders (1993) that include the following related dimensions: a) problem recognition, b) the decision to seek help, and c) service selection. I then examined the literature pertaining to the influence of cultural values and context on each, with a special focus on how these might inform value differences. In addition, I have also based my literature elements on three general explanations from Lau and Takeuchi (2001) because both of them have made extensive elaborations on the scope of cultural values and counselling relevant to my research concerning:

- a) Conflict between traditional Asian values and Western psychotherapy process.
- b) Cognitive appraisal of psychological problems.
- c) Shame and stigma associated with mental illness.

These themes are distributed across the following sections.

### **Problem recognition**

Help seeking is most likely to occur when a problem is recognised as undesirable and when it is deemed unlikely to go away on its own. This is similar to Arnault's conception (2009), that the help-seeking process is triggered by physical or emotional sensations. It is relatively easy for teachers and counsellors to assess and identify the

severity of students' problems. However, the condition is difficult to evaluate when it comes to the adolescents' different perceptions concerning the severity of the problems. Most adolescents and parents might regard some signs of antisocial behaviour and emotional instability as normal (Moffit, Caspi, Dickson, Silva & Stanton, 1996). Expecting that such behaviour will dissipate by itself has caused some parents to ignore the behavioural problems of their children and to consider them as just normal. Additionally, Lee (1996) asserts that people differ not only in terms of their recognition of the presence or absence of a problem, but also vary with respect to what is being defines as the problem. This is due to the influence of culture surrounding individuals such as the role and influence of family and conformity to the norm in their community. I regard these issues as worth investigating, as there might be different ways of viewing problems among adolescents. They are yet to be discovered in this research.

## **The decision to seek help**

### **a) The role of culture**

Most of the studies report that the decision to seek help varies by culture and context. I found most of the findings attempted to essentialise culture according to racial groups, gender or ethnic differences. Most of the findings indicated that some cultures tend to believe that the best way to deal with psychological problems is to avoid thinking about them. The findings from Cheng, Leong and Geist (1993) indicated that some Asian American groups believe that the best way to deal with a certain problem is not to engage in thinking about upsetting events. The ability to "tough out" a difficult situation is honoured among African American adolescents (Snowden, 2001) where most adolescent boys speak of "chilling" or dampening down on a negative effect as a way to cope with anger or stress. In a similar vein about the effect of culture towards attitudes, Amy, Zhang, Snowden and Sue (1998) reported that Asian Americans are said to have a reticent character in terms of discussing mental distress even with their family and friends.

On a similar note, most studies that were conducted on Asian Americans (Kung, 2004; Chen & Mak, 2008; Cheung & Liu, 2005; Park & Kim, 2008; Kim, Atkinson and Yang, 1999; Kim, Atkinson, and Umemoto, 2001; Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe and Hong, 2001) stressed the issue of interethnic differences and Asian values in help-seeking patterns describing Asian Americans as less likely to seek counselling and mental health services. Similarly, other studies also showed that Asian Americans, hold less positive attitudes towards seeking help compared to either Anglo-Americans or more acculturated Asian Americans (Kim & Omizo, 2003; Atkinson & Gim, 1989). I find that this pattern of findings remains similar, as revealed by Masuda et al. (2009), and Wong, Kim and Tran (2010), who respectively indicated that Asian American college students had sought fewer psychological services, were more stigmatised to the service, showed less favourable attitudes concerning a variety of help-seeking attitudes, and preferred disengagement coping strategies. Adherence to Asian cultural values, particularly self-control and conformity to norms, was identified as contributors to their negative attitudes towards psychological help and willingness to see a counsellor.

Furthermore, gender, interdependent self-construal and collective self-esteem are also regarded as predictors to professional psychological help-seeking attitudes. It was revealed in a quantitative study conducted by Yeh (2002) on 594 Taiwanese college students that female students exhibited more positive attitudes than their male counterparts. Additionally, interdependent self-construal and collective self-esteem have a significant relationship to positive help-seeking attitudes.

#### **b) Knowledge and exposure to the service**

Most studies indicated that students' values and attitudes towards the service were generally related to their perceived knowledge and exposure as well as their current psychological state of affairs relating to the service. Cheung and Liu (2005) found that under-utilisation of social services among 1,065 junior high school students in ten schools in Hong Kong and China resulted from the effects of perceived societal disdain and uselessness of the services in solving their educational and personal problems. Similarly, the findings of Goh et al. (2007) reveal that the positive attitude of Chinese students' towards seeking professional help is significantly associated with gender, prior counselling contact and prior knowledge about counselling and psychology. Students

with a broad range of help-seeking preferences have more positive attitudes than students with a narrower range. Females tend to report more positive attitudes than males. As I scrutinised the questionnaire used in the former study, I discerned that the components of help seeking attitudes were only restricted to the domain stated, as it was conducted using quantitative measure. I consider that there might be other pertinent types of attitude that were not emphasised by participants but might be considered important to the research outcome. Moreover, the choice of sample that was not considered cross-culture restricted the effort of getting a wider perspective of multiracial groups in Hong Kong. These limitations have certain implications to my study in terms of methodology as well as the choice of the sample selection. Thus, my study takes into account these related aspects as well as the importance of methodological orientation in understanding their attitudes.

### **c) Acculturation**

Empirical support also indicated that one's level of acculturation is associated with a willingness to seek mental health services. Studies suggest that Asian Americans who are more acculturated to American values and norms hold more positive attitudes towards seeking professional help and greater tolerance of stigma (Mallinckrodt, Shigeoka & Suzuki, 2005; Suinn, 2010; Leong, Kim & Gupta, 2011). A similar pattern of findings was also exhibited in a study conducted by Shechtman, Hiradin and Zina (2003) in Israel. This comparative study of adolescents' behaviour among Muslims, Druze, and Jews indicates that Muslim adolescents show the highest level of self-disclosure in all four dimensions of behaviour. The lowest rates of self-disclosure, shown by Druze, can be related to differences in the acculturation process between two groups. The Druze are known to be the most traditional group and least acculturated of the Arabs in Israel and have little exposure to individualist and democratic values, and are more reserved in expressing feelings and discussing problems with their friends. Muslims, however, tend to exhibit a more linear pattern of self-disclosure due to the bicultural context that they live in. Thus, acculturation is one way to measure adherence to culture specific values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that create disparity in the attitudes of seeking psychological help between different ethnic groups. These findings

might inform my study in terms of understanding whether the students' were acculturated to the norms and values of counselling or not. However, I discerned that these quantitative studies failed to capture this issue in an in-depth exploration, as they could not provide the detailed information on how the acculturation process affected the participants' values and beliefs systems.

#### **d) Stigma**

The attitudes about seeking help and negative consequences from others, perceived public and self stigma have also been linked to negative help-seeking attitudes and under-utilisation in counselling and mental health. An Asian study by Kung (2004) indicated that outside help is regarded as a source of shame or "loss of face". This condition is not only experienced by Asians, but also extends to other cultures as well. Those who hold traditional values tend to exhibit their stigma in a help-seeking process. Wallace and Constantine (2005) found that both African American women and men who had higher degrees of Africentric cultural values were associated with greater perceived stigma about counselling and greater self-concealment. However, their findings indicated neither favourable psychological help-seeking attitudes nor perceived counselling stigma significantly mediated the relationship between Africentric cultural values and self-concealment behaviour. This situation indicates that the attitudes and behaviours of individuals in a certain community are strongly affiliated by their culture.

Stigma and negative mental health attitudes, as reported by Chandra and Minkovitz (2007), are present in early adolescence. Both researchers found that the mid-Atlantic suburban students' tendencies to avoid expressing unpleasant emotions were due to the public stigma that is acquired through their interactions with family members and peers. Komiya, Good and Sherrod (2000), and Vogel, Wade and Hackler (2007; 2008), Ludwikowski, Vogel and Armstrong (2009), Vogel, Shechtman and Wade (2010), discovered that perceived public stigma among various ethnic groups across different ages contributed to the experience of self stigma, which, in turn, affected help seeking attitudes and willingness. Thus, societies in which individuals interact with one another, are seen as contributory factors to learned values that lead to perceived self-stigma.

## **Service selection**

I was informed by many studies that report about the importance of socio-cultural norms, which may facilitate or inhibit help-seeking and service selection depending on their socio cultural norms on help-seeking. In cultures where there is a norm of strong and tight networks, individuals may not seek counsellors or mental health services because of the perceived availability and sufficiency of the network. Previous Asian and Western studies have found that parents or family and friends (Barksdale & Molock, 2008) are the most frequently used sources of help by adolescents and undergraduate students, while professionals, including counsellors and mental health professionals, are much less used or preferred (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Setiawan, 2006). The findings support the studies conducted by Nguyen and Anderson (2005), and Yoo, Goh and Yoon (2005), who indicated that the higher the level of negative social network orientation and self concealment individuals exhibited, the more negative their attitudes towards seeking professional help. Additionally, Logan (2001) in his review on the role of parents in adolescent mental health service utilisation emphasised the importance of the parental role in providing awareness on adolescents' distress and identifying specific emotional or behavioural problems. This study supports a local quantitative study conducted by Yunus (2001), on 148 secondary school students in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, describing that students tend to disclose most of their problems to their mothers, followed by their friends, fathers and finally their counsellors. In a similar vein, Ho et al. (2007) indicated that parental affinity influenced African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Latino youth to under-utilise the mental health service compared to non-Hispanic White youth. Similar results were also revealed by Vogel, Wester and Larson (2007) who indicated the importance of one's social network on help-seeking attitudes to mental health professionals indicating that seeking help among participants was triggered by those who had sought help as well as those who were close to them. Therefore, these quantitative findings emphasise the significance of social networks surrounding individuals that hinder or promote the attitudes of seeking psychological help. Since the participants of my research are adolescents, it is important for me to explore the potential of the families and peers in help seeking intention behaviour. This is because adolescent development is associated with shifts in the salience of peer versus family normative influences.



In terms of gender differences in help seeking preferences, Chandra and Minkovitz (2007) found that more girls than boys from 274 eighth graders of suburban community in a Mid-Atlantic State, turned to a friend for help for an emotional concern whereas more boys turned to their family members first. Boys had less mental health knowledge or experience with a higher mental health stigma than girls. Girls were twice as likely as boys to report willingness to use mental health services. Barksdale and Molock (2008), however, reported that males who had higher perceived peer norms had stronger family norms. Nevertheless, the study of Riet and Knoetze (2004) accounted that females were more willing to access professional sources compared to males. This could partly be attributed to the socialising factor, where males are required to be strong and cope with their problems; hence, preferring not to approach formal sources of help. This study also identified two main forms of seeking help from others, either in the form of talking or giving solution to the problems whether it is a practical solution or 'keeping quiet solution'. Thus, I can conclude that the psychological help-seeking acceptance from both genders is still relatively low, with masculine and feminist characteristics differentiating the forms of help-seeking and problem solving methods.

### **Cultural values and attitudes towards counsellor and counselling services**

Most research conducted in Malaysia indicated participants' negative perceptions and experiences towards counselling services in secondary schools or at the level of higher institutions. Studies conducted by Suradi (1994) on Malaysian secondary school students indicated their reluctance to seek counselling. They perceived school counselling activities as boring, cumbersome, unnecessary, and ineffective; 21.7 per cent students perceived their counsellor as having negative characteristics, such as being unapproachable, not understanding and giving wrong advice. The study also showed that 59.4 per cent of the students were not prepared to see a counsellor for help, 54.1 per cent of students disliked being forced into counselling on the notion that they will not benefit in any way from counselling, while 42.5 per cent have difficulties in expressing emotional feelings, and, thus, in participating effectively in counselling. Similar quantitative results were revealed by Li (2004) who conducted a study on 214 form four

students in one rural secondary school in Kuching, Malaysia. These findings indicate that the students' low level of participation in counselling was mainly due to their internal inclination to the service, including unreadiness to reveal to a stranger, communication barrier and doubts about confidentiality of the counselling session whereby a significant difference was exhibited between the academically good and academically poor students on their external reasons for not seeking counselling. The findings of the study also show that students seek counselling because they were well-informed about the counselling services – knew the importance, benefits and understood the counselling process. The findings echo the results of Aizat, Shukri and Izzah (2007) who indicated that the major reasons for unwillingness to seek counselling among 52 students from two secondary schools in Malaysia were due to the lack of acceptance and availability of information about the service.

However, despite having considerable knowledge and information about the service, the level of acceptance towards the service was still relatively low among participants. It was revealed through a comprehensive quantitative study conducted by Sidek et al. (2005), which involved 107 school principals, 88 school counsellors, 628 teachers and 1984 school students in few secondary schools in Peninsular Malaysia, that although 96.6 per cent of participants heard about counselling and 92.7 per cent knew the role of the service in school, only 32.4 per cent of them used the service. These findings indicate that the level of acceptance of counselling services among Malaysian students is still relatively low because of the perceived irrelevant role and contribution of counsellor and counselling services in their life.

As I analysed these findings, I discovered that the issue of negative acceptance towards the service was not only exhibited by most Malaysian secondary school students but also extended to higher education levels in Malaysia. Chian and Louis (2009) revealed that, generally, Malaysian students in higher institutions were not yet ready to seek psychological services. These findings indicate that counselling services have not obtained greater acceptance from the students irrespective of gender and racial groups in Malaysia. They were not yet ready to seek psychological service even though they had been exposed to it during their secondary school. A quantitative study by Yeap (2008) with two groups of 587 Malaysian members of the public aged 18 and above and also

with 246 undergraduate students in one public university indicated that the majority of respondents (90 per cent) did not have a good knowledge of or good attitude towards psychology (and counselling) and mental health. All respondents in the study displayed a more or less neutral attitude towards psychology as well as mental health issues. Regression analysis indicated that age, ethnic background, religion, education level, and residential location are the demographic characteristics found to be significantly related to either a respondent's knowledge or attitude towards mental health issues and help-seeking behaviour. In the second part of her study, the findings indicate that undergraduate students have misconceptions about psychology regardless of their declared major (psychology and non-psychology major) and demographic characteristics. However, the study indicated that students' knowledge level in both psychology and mental health were significantly better than the general public. Generally, this study shows that the level of knowledge and understanding of psychology and counselling as well as mental health among Malaysians is still low. They hold a misconception of psychology and mental health, which, hence, affects their attitude towards the service.

Other quantitative studies, by Rusnani, Fang and Asmah (2008), and Suradi (2010) regarding the attitudes and help seeking attitudes among Malaysian undergraduate university students, also revealed similar negative attitudes. There was a significant difference in the attitudes of male and female participants in both studies but no significant difference was accounted between racial groups – Malay, Chinese and Indian – in the latter study. However, there was a significant difference in the former study between those who were exposed to the service and those who were not. However, neither study offered a detailed explanation about the students' negative attitudes. Hence, an in-depth study needs to be conducted to explore and understand the root cause of their attitude. I regard understanding the root of the problem is practical, otherwise it will remain a cyclical pattern forever.

Other issues relating to the negative attitude towards the service, concerns the fear of psychological treatment. A quantitative study conducted by Fang (2005) pertaining to the relationship between the fear of psychological treatment and attitude towards

seeking counselling among 321 Malaysian undergraduate students indicated that there is a significant difference in both fear of psychological treatment between male and female students, as well as those who had no prior contact with the counsellors. This indicates that the stigma towards the service still exists and the perceived lack of knowledge and understanding on the role of counselling is greater among students. However, this research failed to provide me with the contextual details behind the fear of treatment faced by the participants.

The whole school approach of counselling is also connected to the acceptance of or willingness to use the service. A qualitative study conducted by Hui (2002) revealed an overall mismatch between the beliefs of teachers in Hong Kong about a whole school approach to guidance and its practice and their perceived school reality. The majority of them perceived that a whole school approach was not practised by the school community, and, thus, affected their cooperation and participation in the service. Similar patterns of findings were also revealed by Cooper, Hough and Loynd (2007) who conducted two phases of studies; quantitative and qualitative study with 71 and 33 Scottish secondary school teachers. A misconception occurred in respect of the role and conception of counselling in schools whereby they perceived counselling as an independent entity, and, hence, provided less cooperation to the school counsellors. Nevertheless, the findings indicated that teachers have a positive attitude to counselling, particularly their views of counsellors' independence and expertise with a high proportion of teachers conceptualising counselling in terms of advice giving. Hence, these studies indicated the importance of a whole school approach as a system in fostering student development and enhancing team spirit among school communities towards a counselling service.

Similar misconceptions of school counsellors were also demonstrated in a qualitative study conducted by Moore, Henfield and Owens (2008) with 10 African American males in special education in two low-performing urban high schools in the Midwestern part of the United States. Students indicated both negative and positive attitudes concerning the issue. Counsellors were perceived to have a major role in providing assistance relating to students' academic placement and course selection with the actual experiences revolving around scheduling and academic planning. Additionally, the issue

of comfort level with the school counsellor that involved family-school boundaries and counsellor time availability had become the major hindrance for participants.

Psychological services quality, ethical considerations and characteristics of counsellors or mental health professionals are also considered vital in facilitating help-seeking behaviour. Riet and Knoetze (2004) mentioned in their qualitative study of help seeking patterns among 139 secondary school youth in urban and rural secondary schools in Eastern Cape Africa that a high level of trust or an emphasis on confidentiality will facilitate the ease of help seeking, while the personal characteristics of the help source play a major role in deciding whether or not help is to be sought. In addition, the credibility of the service provider in the form of willingness to help, competence, reliability and trustworthiness were of utmost importance to the help seeker. Mistrust towards counsellors would develop if these characteristics are not stressed. This situation could answer the following which indicates that ethnic groups have a significant relationship to counsellors' preferences. A quantitative study by Gardiner (2006), which involved 151 Black students, male and female in one college in Texas, indicated that students' ethnicity has a linear relationship with their preference for counsellors of the same race.

Additionally, a few studies revealed that multicultural skilled counsellors are the most preferable characteristic of counsellors among participants. A quantitative study, using analogue video conducted by Wang and Kim (2010) among 113 Asian American college students at large West Coast University in the US, indicated that the session containing therapist multicultural competencies received higher ratings than the session without therapist multicultural competence. Moreover, participant values were positively associated with participant ratings of counselling process, while the value of emotional self-control was negatively correlated. Similar findings about the importance of having multicultural competence in dealing with clients of different contexts were also reported by a qualitative study conducted by Ringel (2000; 2005). The former study addressed important issues to be acknowledged by therapists such as 'self', resistance, self-disclosure, counter-transference dynamics, cultural values and world-views of clients in multicultural counselling. Moreover, the latter study conducted with 15 non-Asian therapists acknowledged clashes between Asian cultures and therapist orientation in terms of the following characteristics: interdependence versus

acculturation or individuation, equality versus hierarchy or authority and supportive versus dynamic treatment. Thus, problem formulations and treatment goals in counselling should be closely linked to clients' social environment and their cultural context. As noted by Pope-Davis et al. (2002), the relationship between the counsellor and client's self identified needs is a distinguishing element that contributes to the client's perceived satisfaction in counselling relationships.

The above findings support studies by Constantine, Kindaichi, Arorash, Donnelly and Jung (2002), and Goldberg and Tidwell (1990), who indicated that counsellors' multicultural competence was an important predictor of students' counselling preferences and satisfaction. Furthermore, the findings from Li, Kim and O'Brien (2007), and Zhang and Dixon (2001) analogue studies indicated that culturally responsive counsellors are regarded by Asian students as significantly more expert, attractive, trustworthy and credible than those in the culturally neutral condition. These findings support the exploratory qualitative results from Tatar (2001) regarding adolescents' consideration of self-referral and counsellors' perceptions of these considerations. The findings indicate that 421 Israeli tenth grade students of seven secondary schools with heterogeneous socio-economic backgrounds and 123 secondary school counsellors agreed that trustworthiness and confidentiality are the primary factors for their willingness to seek help. Additionally, adolescents also emphasised the importance of counsellors' expertness as a consideration for self-referral. Furthermore, according to Kim, Ng and Ahn (2009), Li and Kim (2004), and Kim, Li and Liang (2002), culturally competent counsellors could develop a stronger working alliance as well as enhance empathetic understanding among clients. Generally, these studies have promoted that understanding and appreciation of clients' cultural values are the most important qualities that would help to reduce the resistance and unwillingness towards counsellors and counselling services.

In this regard, it can be concluded that addressing cultural values is essential in exploring the attitude of unwillingness toward counselling. I consider all the information gathered from the literature as a source for me to examine these issues while, at the same time, trying to avoid putting any judgmental thoughts in my participants' life.

## **Critical reflections on the existing literature**

My literature review has considered all the literature pertaining to culture and help seeking in counselling; including the stigma associated with psychological help, self concealment, cultural mismatch, help-seeking attitudes, outcome and expectations, multicultural identity and psychological issues, ethnic and gender differences. Even though these aspects seem rather distinct from one another, I believe they are related and can contribute to a better understanding of cultural values in a more comprehensive way. I am also indebted by the 40-year review on multicultural counselling outcome research conducted by D'Andrea and Heckman (2008), which paved the way for me to identify important issues as well as the limitations underlying them. Indeed the review has stimulated my thinking about challenges that I might face in conducting my research as well as in planning, directing and highlighting the important scope of my research.

I have been inspired by research conducted by Kim, Ng and Ahn (2005); Kim, Atkinson, and Umemoto (2001); Kim, Atkinson and Yang (1999); Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe and Hong (2001); Li, et al. (2007); Kim and Omizo (2003) within the area of multicultural counselling, especially those relating to cultural values and the counselling process. Discussions about values inherent among Asians, as well as conflicts and clashes that arise in counselling services between a collectivistic and individualistic society, have given me a clear guide for exploring Malaysian students' values in a more comprehensive way. Detailed examination of the elements of collectivistic dimensions, for example, emotional self control and conformity to norms, needs to be further explored. The findings have provided me with an insight into exploring the importance of values in determining an individual's attitude and behaviour. The broad discussion on Asian cultural values, will act as guidance for me in exploring the multiple layers of Malaysian secondary school students' cultural values at the macro and micro level.

I have also seen that many Asian researchers, especially Chinese and Korean, tend to conduct studies within their own populations (Chiu, 2004; Kung, 2004; Lau & Takeuchi, 2001; Mak, Chen, Lam & Yiu, 2009; Zhang & Dixon, 2001). This has made me more aware of the importance of conducting research within my own society. In

addition, to date, very few qualitative studies have examined cultural values in counselling among students in the Malaysian school setting.

Immersing myself in different kinds of multicultural counselling research have led me to conclude that most of them (Zhang, Snowden, & Sue, 1998; Bui & Takeuchi, 1992; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2007; Ho, Yeh, McCabe, & Hough, 2007; Komiya, et al., 2000; Ponterotto & Benesch, 1988; Riet, 2004; Ringel, 2005; Seeman, Jenkins, Soper, & Woller, 2004; Vogel, et al., 2008; Vogel & Wei, 2005; Yoo, et al., 2005) have been conducted within the *etic* or essentialist approach that denotes universal aspects of human behaviour, theory, practice and research (Sue, 1997). Although the *etic* approach has its own merits, an 'imposed etic' problem may arise when a certain culture is assumed to be universal and is applied to other cultures without establishing a cross cultural equivalent (Sue, 2003) as well as increasing the tendency for over-generalisation and providing easy answers for culture (Holliday, 2000, p. 2). With the aim of understanding individuals in their own context, I will emphasise not only the *etic* perspective, but extend my lens to view the *emic* perspective, which is a culture specific approach of behaviour from the cultural framework or context in which it occurs. As stated by Locke (1991, p. 18) "there are great differences when it comes to study the individual culture within cultural groups as compared to the differences between the dominant culture and subculture". In studying the uniqueness of the individual, I must always display my due respect to the students' cultural groups by preserving both the individual uniqueness and their cultural group membership. Since my study concentrates on exploring participants' cultural values, I regard it is well suited to be placed under qualitative study, as it is considered exploratory by nature. I have also made myself aware of the suggestions proposed by Adams, Benshoff and Harington (2007) to include qualitative approach, which provide open-ended responses for exploring and understanding participants in multicultural research.

In highlighting the limitations of multicultural counselling studies, I have based my discussion on D'Andrea and Heckman's (2008) 40 years (from 1967 to 2007) review of multicultural counselling outcome research. Continuing criticism in most journals according to Li, et al. (2007), regarding problems in sample selection and the use of actual clients and settings, have made me aware of avoiding "reinventing the wheel". I need to carefully select the appropriate participants as it would affect the outcome of my



study. The limitations raised by empirical findings through the 'positivist' position have led me to frame my methodology, which gives voice to the participants.

The literature indicates differences of opinion between researchers which will inform the way I approach the fieldwork. It does not suggest further refinement of research questions, which of necessity, must remain fairly broad and open in an exploratory study of this type. The literature does support the worthwhile nature of further research into the acceptability of counselling in schools.

## CHAPTER 3

### NAVIGATING MY INQUIRY

*"If we want to know the unique experience and perspective of an individual, there is no better way to get this than in the person's own voice"*

(Atkinson, 1998, p.5)

#### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the process in which I conducted my study. First, I begin with a thorough explanation of my philosophical paradigm, which I regard as an essential element that underpins my research. Subsequently, the chosen paradigm led me to discuss my approach to the study as well as my research setting, descriptions of participants and research procedure. However, I have placed the description of data analysis under a separate chapter (Chapter Five), as it is quite lengthy due to the complexity and multi-layered nature of its analysis. Thus, my navigation of inquiry unfolds.

#### **Manoeuvring my research paradigm**

The opportunity to further my PhD study in Bristol University is one of the moments that I will proudly cherish for the rest of my life. The learning process acquired here was indeed a revelation. One of the things that really moved me was the knowledge and practice acquired throughout my MPhil classes. I had chances to learn many new things including knowledge about conducting research, in particular, the research paradigms. Through authors like Creswell (2007), I first understood the meaning of research paradigm. Basically, it is a researcher's worldview and principles towards conducting research that subsequently permeate the entire study processes. Mertens (2010) also taught me the concept of paradigm that entails philosophical assumptions "that guide and direct thinking and action" (p.7). Hence, it is all about the research direction that influences the whole of the researcher's intended study. These meanings took me back to reflect over my previous research practice. Admittedly, I had not been directly exposed to different kinds of research paradigms during my previous master's degree. This was due to the influence of positivism that determined most of the research

traditions practised in Malaysia. At that time, I regarded myself as a person who simply hopped on to the bandwagon. The nature of the research practice at that time restricted my resonance with the study of human subjective experience being considered in guidance and career counselling. Honestly, the topic for my previous master's dissertation was chosen without a solid direction to underpin my study. I was completely detached from the participants and could not engage with their voices to any great extent. Nevertheless, it is not my intention to downgrade the positivist paradigm as I regard it as useful in its own right, especially for studying variables in society, however, it is more limited in its capacity to study and represent human experience and the way interpretations interact with experience.

Indeed, it was difficult for me to disembark from previous tradition. It took me nearly one term to have a clear mind about the distinction between previous research tradition and its alternatives. It was a great challenge for me to understand the concepts as well as the principles. Nevertheless, the research culture practised by Graduate School of Education (GSoE) and the support received from my supervisor had indeed permitted me a space to comprehend the purpose of my study. Due consideration given to my experiences and contextual situation had indeed permitted me a chance to explore the types of paradigms that suit my intended study. It had considerably changed the way I viewed my research study. The technical language that I learned in philosophy classes such as epistemology, ontology, axiology, and rhetorical structure to name but a few enriched my understanding and, hence, informed my research choices. Subsequently, I was convinced about qualitative methodology being my new research direction.

My decision to select the qualitative methodology is because it suits my purpose and intended research, which is exploratory and an interpretative study of a specified issue (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994). The reason behind the use of this methodology is that it provides me with a thick description and helps to capture the details of multiple voices and perspectives (Morrow, 2007) that value the diversity of others. I consider that there may be a variety of aspects of a phenomenon that I will miss if I simply restrict people to forced-choice answers.

I was also reminded by Hollway and Jefferson (1997) about the appropriateness of using the qualitative approach to study sensitive topics such as anxiety and fear. According to them, the issue of anxiety involves the subjective aspects of human beings, which are difficult to explore using quantitative means. They pointed out that:

“...survey methods offered by positivistic paradigms are clearly inadequate for this issue and equally clearly a qualitative approach is necessary for this research purpose because participating, observing, and interviewing seem focused on uncovering the consistent rationales of individual or group action rather than the meaning of inconsistent or contradictory evidence” (pp.54-55).

I consider my study to involve sensitive topics as it revolves around participants' values and attitudes towards counselling. As discussed previously in the literature, stigma and negative labelling are the most reportable attitudes attached to counselling. Thus, I strongly consider that my research can best be approached and dealt with in a qualitative way whereby the participants are given ample chance to comprehend their views without any restrictions and judgmental thoughts.

I acknowledge that various researchers have introduced different terms for the paradigms. Guba and Lincoln (1998) state four different paradigms, namely, Positivism, Post positivism, Critical Theory and Constructivism. In a specific explanation for qualitative research paradigm, Creswell (2007) divides qualitative research into four competing paradigms, namely, Postpositivism, Social Constructivism, Advocacy/Participatory and Pragmatism while dividing the Interpretive Community into three types, namely, Postmodern Perspective, Feminist Theories and Critical Theory. In addition, Mertens (2010, p.8) added two more paradigmatic terms aside from Postpositivism and Constructivist, namely, Transformative and Pragmatic. I chose to explain the classification presented by Creswell (2007) as it covers all the types of paradigms presented by other authors. Postpositivism according to him adheres to a modified objectivist epistemology, as it employs a reductionistic, logical, emphasis on empirical data collection, cause-and-effect oriented and deterministic based on a priori theories. Social Constructivism on the other hand embraces a relativist ontology in which there are many realities and the meanings are co-constructed by both participants and researchers. Meanwhile, the

Advocacy/ Participatory paradigm has extended the principle of multiple realities on issues that are especially related to power and oppression. Pragmatism emphasises the outcomes of the research rather than antecedent conditions, and, hence, uses multiple methods to best answer the research problems.

Before explaining the choice of my research paradigm, I regard a clear explanation of the philosophical root of the study as being crucially important. I first highlight philosophical counselling as it is related to the way my research scope is viewed and undertaken. My research uses as its premise philosophical counselling, as espoused by Lahav (1996). The main characteristics of a philosophical approach towards counselling are as follows:

- a) Focus is given to the client's understanding of life and worldview by dealing primarily with the client's ideas, values, conceptions, assumptions, and theories, etc.
- b) Counselling would involve critical self-evaluation by the client through analysing and examining the consistency, implications and acceptability of their belief-systems.
- c) Counselling would facilitate self-investigation by the client on the basis of non-empirical considerations, such as the use of rational deliberative processes or logical deduction.

Overall, philosophical counselling is based on the idea that in order to achieve the therapeutic goals of counselling, counsellors must be able to tune into the client's internalised experience as social beings and seek to facilitate the client in attaining a coherent perspective of his (the client's) worldview through self-examination. The premise of philosophical counselling complements the aim of my research to adopt cultural sensitivity and commitment to the idea that effective multicultural counselling depends on the skilful and non-prejudicial incorporation of cultural data into the counselling process. This philosophical approach towards counselling is also in line with the aim of my research to enable participants to express their own voice in

describing their experiences. However, the empowerment of participants is not only tailored around comprehending their subjective voices and worldviews but also involves understanding themselves as individuals who are shaped by their social and cultural values. This led me to the incorporation of social constructivism/constructionism – interpretive paradigm to underpin my research.

### **Social Constructivism/constructionism – interpretivism**

Throughout my learning processes, I have been introduced to the concept of social constructivism (Creswell, 2007), which has often been used in combination with interpretivism (Mertens, 2010). This worldview advocates that individuals hold subjective and multiple meaning of experiences. They are constructed through the historical and cultural norms of individuals (p.21). The process of understanding participants not only revolves around participant's personal beliefs and personal boundaries but also focuses on social interaction as the basis for knowledge. This involves the understanding of others in their social contexts. Thus, the process of co-construction or mutual negotiation between the researcher and participants is crucial in understanding their situation. Shkedi (2005, p.4) regarded the research relationship from the constructivist position as 'heterarchical', which denotes the interweaving of experiences and relationships in a web of meaning. It is totally opposite to the top down conception that characterizes the positivistic paradigm.

This approach is suitable for the nature of my intended study because, as emphasised by Ponterotto (2005), it is the common conceptual base for qualitative multicultural research. Thus, my research paradigm is derived from the epistemological argument that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual as informed by the cultural and social values held. This research embraces a hermeneutical approach, which maintains that meaning is hidden and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection assisted by my interaction with participants.

I note, however, that some disagreements exist about the definition and use of the concept of 'constructivism' and 'constructionism'. Therefore, it would be useful for

me to clarify at the outset these two related concepts. According to Raskin, as cited in Young and Collin (2004, p. 375) “constructivism focuses on meaning making and the constructing of the social and psychological worlds through individual cognitive processes. On the other hand, constructionism emphasises that the social and psychological worlds are made real through social processes and interaction”. My constructivism paradigm, thus, encompasses also the constructionism dimension, because, as argued by McLeod (2001a), such approach opens up all aspects of social phenomenon to interpretive scrutiny and permits self-reflection by me as a researcher. In this regard, knowledge is understood only through a contextualised process that organises one’s conception of life in terms of one’s ideas, beliefs, assumptions and wishes, which are influenced by social and cultural factors. In addition, this paradigm promotes equal power in both researcher and participants as it denotes co-construction processes and, hence avoid[s] accusations of solipsism, self-indulgence, navel gazing or narcissism” among researchers (Etherington, 2004, p.31) (see finding chapters).

I chose the approach of interpretivism because unlike the value-free approach of positivist-empiricism, interpretivism allows cultural dimensions, such as traditions, values and belief systems to be considered in a study. As described by Banyard and Miller (1998), this approach permits an exploration of respondents’ subjective interpretations of life events, the personal meanings they create and the feelings and cognitions that underlie and result from the meaning making process. It also offers research participants the opportunity to share their experiences using whatever words they choose, rather than having to reduce their experiences so that it fits into a range of predefined answer choices.

The interpretation of meaning is not only confined to the participants, but also involves myself in the process of knowledge construction. Constructivism-interpretivism permits me to bring the personal and cultural background of my participants as well as my own into the research scene. Thus, within this approach, my being a female Asian Muslim with a Malay cultural background, as well as my position as a counsellor educator makes it inevitable that my particular view will form part of the interpretive aspect of the research. In this regard, according to McLeod (2001b) the inclusion of a social aspect that embraces cultural and historical aspect

can widen the interpretive horizon within the study as well as permit reflexivity. Thus, interpretivism provided me with the position to experience the process of becoming a *reflexive researcher who is striving to empathise with the client's or students' situation and to expand my own awareness sufficiently to enable their voices to be heard.*

Conducting the research within the perspective of constructivism-interpretivism is also in line with the humanist influence and philosophical counselling that conceive human beings as an active, as opposed to a passive agent in the conception of life (Delanty, 1997). Thus, in contrast to the value free approach of empirical-positivism, I believe that constructivism/ social constructionism-interpretivism will provide a more meaningful understanding of the influence of cultural values in one's conception of life. By giving due respect to the participants and allowing them to express their own meaning and interpretation of the issues presented, it will enable me to identify idiosyncratic variations within a culture as well as those culturally embedded behaviours presented by participants (Lee, 1996). Moreover, the inclusion of subjective constructivist and contextual perspectives based on the socio cultural context of culturally different people, complements and enhances the legitimacy of counselling in multicultural settings in providing an understanding of complex and dynamic relationships in a cultural context (Pederson, 1997a, p.176).

When I pondered the meaning of the social constructionism/constructivism-interpretivism paradigm, I realised that I would need to become more aware of my own processes and willing to become more transparent and accountable for them. This is in line with Etherington (2004) who mentions the importance of being accountable in undertaking the research duty.

“...including ourselves in our work needs to be intentional, in terms of the research outcome: a means to an end and not an end in itself” (p. 31).

Having a sense of understanding towards the intended research paradigm led me to choose an appropriate research approach to achieve the aim of my study, namely, Narrative ethnography and Case Study.



## **Research Approach 1 (Narrative Ethnography)**

Knowledge of human behaviour is not gained solely through introspection. There are many alternative ways of understanding human phenomena. I bring the example of understanding people's preferences towards 'Durian', the king of the fruits in Southeast Asia. It is not a surprise to hear that some people regard Durian as fragrant, while others find the aroma overpowering and offensive. We might find some people adore the fruit and eat it enthusiastically. We might also observe that others immediately put their fingers to their nose, indicating disfavour towards the smell of the fruit. However, there is no simple way to describe and explain people's unique preferences unless one is there, tasting the fruit, exploring the smell, feeling its shape and becoming immersed within the community. By doing so, we are able to describe their attitudes, and, at the same time, also convey our reactions.

I consider ethnography as one of the most suitable approaches for my research since it is specially meant for the researching culture (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Mattis & Quizon, 2007). Creswell (2007) mentions that "ethnography is appropriate if the needs are to describe how a cultural group works and to explore the beliefs, language, behaviours and issues such as power, resistance, and dominance" (p. 70). According to Cunliffe (2010, p.227), ethnography differs from other approaches as it involves "immersion and translation". Hence, my study, which concentrates on understanding students' and school communities' values towards counselling services, complements the nature of ethnography. I regard the use of this approach as appropriate as it involves my extended observations by immersing and translating my interaction and relationship in the day-to-day lives of the people.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), there are abundant types of ethnography that include life history, memoir, narrative ethnography, auto ethnography, fiction, applied ethnography and ethnographic decision modelling. Mertens (2010) mentions that current ethnographic approaches such as critical ethnography, feminist ethnography, auto ethnography, performance ethnography, portraiture, and photo ethnography, emerged as a result of the diversity of issues in human behaviour, such as migration and new technology. As the world is now becoming so diverse, I discern that the concept of Culture with a capital 'C' – Culture of societies (Cunliffe, 2010) proposed by traditional

ethnography is becoming less relevant in understanding people. Their views on segregation of society according to macro social structures are becoming less pertinent in explaining the differential and uniqueness of people. I acknowledge that culture is fluid, and, hence, should be viewed in a flexible way.

After meticulously searching for my direction, finally, I identified that my ethnographic approach falls under narrative ethnography since it focuses “on the integration of the life history and memoir” (Suzuki, et al., 2005, p. 207). Memoir refers to the report of an ethnographer’s journey in the field. According to Chase (2005), narrative ethnography is considered a fourth approach to narrative enquiry. As an interdisciplinary approach, narrative inquiry is shaped by interests and assumptions embedded in researchers’ disciplines. Chase (2005) mentions five major approaches in contemporary narrative inquiry, namely, psychological approach that emphasise the relationship between individuals’ life stories and psychosocial development. The second and third approach revolve around the sociological approach in which the former concentrates on “identity work and construction of self in local cultural context and organisation”, while the latter focuses on “intensive interviews of specific aspects of people’s lives” and how the interaction with the researcher is co-constructed (pp.648 -659). Narrative ethnography, which is the fourth approach, is led by the field of anthropology, and considers the transformation of both the ethnographic and life history methods. The distinctive feature of this approach is the presentation of researcher and participants within “a single multivocal text that focused on the character and process of the human encounter” (Tedlock, 1992, p.xiii). It differs from auto ethnography, which is considered the fifth approach that focuses more on achieving the researcher’s personal transformation (Spry, 2001).

I consider narrative ethnography as appropriate to my study as its aim is not only centred on the lives of the participants but also gives due consideration to the engagement of my own experiences, perceptions and emotional reactions. I am also aware that this conception is considered ‘new ethnography’, as espoused by Goodall (2000). Among the distinctive principles emphasised by this new approach is reflexivity, which considers the involvement of researcher’s experiences and contexts in relation to understanding participants. It is regarded as different from the traditional ethnography that only focuses on observing and hearing the participants’ voices in

search for the production of knowledge (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Hence, engaging myself in this approach requires me to not only actively try to see the counselling world through the eyes of students and the school community but also to strive to try and comprehend their lives through my personal experiences and context. Subsequently, this would allow me to reflect on the implications of my newly acquired insights for my personal practice as a counsellor educator, and, as such, it is considered highly personal (Coffey, 2002). My view is closely communicated by Goodall (2000).

“...it is important to recognize that since the very beginning of modern ethnography, personal feelings and perceptions, a storytelling form, an intellectual quest have been the rhetorical and narrative cornerstone of an ethnographic narrative” (p.67).

Furthermore, according to Hinchman and Hinchman (1997), this approach is well suited for a constructivist-interpretivist framework, as it provides opportunities to elicit the perceptions, meanings (Hoshmand, 2005) and experiences of participants’ cultural values and to provide rich descriptions of them. By attending a first-hand interaction with people in their everyday lives, it enables me to obtain a better understanding of the students’ lives as well as their values towards school counselling. I still remember my experience doing quantitative research for my career promotion a few years before. At that time, I was researching social anxiety among secondary school students. However, at the end of the study, I was left with some frustration. I could only comprehend the surface level of social anxiety among them without being able to understand their behaviour in a specific context. Hence, the decision to change the direction of my studies towards narrative ethnography was partly as a compensation to counter my previous frustration.

Moreover, this new approach (narrative ethnography) is considered practical and more sensible as it can be done in a relatively short time (Hammersley, 2006). Jeffrey and Troman (2004) divide ethnography time modes into three types: compressed, selective intermittent and recurrent modes. I regard that my approach falls under a selective intermittent time mode as it allocates longer yet flexible time from three months up to two years, as compared to a few days to one-month period in keeping with the compressed mode. My daily engagement with the school community for almost three

months was also in line with the time frame given by the Ministry of Higher Education to conduct the research within that stipulated period. Meanwhile, my research does not fit the recurrent time mode as I do not intend to compare the similarities and differences as well as changes over temporal phases of time. My aim to understand values towards school counselling services matched an intermittent time mode as I had already selected the focus for my research including the people as well as the area of my study. This is also known as focused ethnography, as espoused by Morse and Richards (2002).

I consider that the narrative ethnographic approach is comparative and relational as it focuses the human social process within two lenses; the macro-cultural level and micro-interactional level. The micro-interactional level is concerned with the individual's perception and understanding of themselves and others, whilst the macro-cultural level gives emphasis to shared group behaviour that guides individual values and expectations (Wehrly & Gegeo, 1987). As suggested by both of them, my study combined both macro and micro level work to gain understanding of the individual perspectives of the selected participants including students, counsellors and the school community in their daily functions, and to understand how cultural contexts influence their perspectives.

Pole and Morrison (2003) situate ethnography within a theoretical tradition, which places a primacy on the importance of situated meaning and contextualised experience as the basis for explaining and understanding social behaviour. Considering the importance of contextualised elements, I therefore had preserved my participants' context accordingly so that the meaning remained in its genuine character.

Since my research is based on the narrative ethnography, the importance of stories in meaning making process is emphasised. Story in narrative research as asserted by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) is a first-person oral telling or retelling of events related to the personal or social experiences of an individual. Story enables both, the researcher and participant to actively collaborate in a research process, thus lessen the potential gap between them. Furthermore, according to Geogakopoulou (2006, pp.235-236) "narratives occur in response to the researcher's elicitation questions or prompts". In explaining the meaning behind the stories, I took into account the key experiences considered pivotal in the participant's life.

In applying an ethnographic approach, I took into consideration three cultural sources, namely, communication, behaviour and participants' artefacts in comprehending my participants' culture. I acknowledged the importance of field notes as one of the most notable elements in ethnographic research design. The demands of the field notes required me to be there, "to observe, to ask questions, and to write down what is seen and heard" (Shkedi, p.56), which included conducting individual interviews, group interviews and observation (will be explained further in Chapter 5). My direct and indirect observation had specifically focussed on the context of the physical setting (counselling unit) as well as the participants' behaviours, activities and interactions. I also consider my observations to be *unstructured*, as indicated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), as they were not restricted to the school counselling unit only but extended to the school compound including the classroom and school's main hall where guidance and counselling activities occurred.

Being a participant observer, I was first reminded by Shkedi (2005) that the meaning of observation should not be taken at face value. He asserted that ethnography means learning from people. It involves the researcher's ability to understand the implicit and explicit meaning of actions and events of the studied culture. Thus, in conducting my research, I was not merely observing the situation but immersing and engaging actively in a reflexivity process. In addition, my active role also involved selecting and processing the meaning considered important to the participants. Therefore, the process enabled me to grasp an understanding of their behaviour in the total milieu in which it occurs, as well as being able to interpret this behaviour to the readers of the research.

## **Research Approach 2 (Case Study)**

My narrative ethnography is not considered a standalone approach. Instead, it requires a Case Study approach to situate the contextual understanding of this issue. It is just like the act of comprehending people's preferences towards 'Durian'. Before attempting to grasp the behaviour of the people, we have to first specify the target community and the

area involved in the study. Hence, a case study approach is considered essential to my research as it places a contextual understanding of participants.

I found that there is an agreement in terms of the definition of case study among authors. Most of them provide quite a similar definition of case study that denotes an exploration of an issue or phenomenon within a bounded setting. Merriam (1988, p.9) defines “case study as an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group”. According to Creswell (2007, p.73), case study involves “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system”. In addition, Yin (2003, p.13) indicates that a case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”. Based on these descriptions, I regarded the case study as appropriate for my study because I wanted to understand students and school community’s values towards school counselling in a specific setting. In addition, it is considered multi-layered as it involves multiple cases of participants in one school community, namely, students, school counsellors, teachers and school administrators.

Obviously, a case study approach to reporting research outcomes is an appropriate and effective way to present “a rich narrative description” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 47). It is particularistic and contextual in the sense that it depends on the readers to decide whether it is representative or similar to their own local situation. Knowledge gathered through this type of case study is considered subjective because by nature it is based on the responses given by the participant. This conception is emphasised by Polkinghorne (2000, p. 469) who states that, “one never experiences phenomena in a direct ‘brute’ fashion but always in the context of an interpretative framework of the background”. In this regard, I kept on reminding myself that there are multiple meanings attached to phenomenon in the minds of people that I should attend to in the best possible way. Therefore, in understanding their situation, due respect and consideration to their context were given top priority.

I learned from Stake (2006) that there are three types of case study: Intrinsic, Instrumental and Collective. Both Intrinsic and Instrumental Case Study refers to the study of case in particular but differs in its purpose in which the former concentrates

on the case itself while the latter use the case to inform insights about the phenomena under study. The collective case study, however, differs from the first two as it involves collecting data from a number of cases to understand a particular phenomenon. Therefore, I had identified my research to be a collective case study (Stake, 2006) because it was undertaken to understand the multiple voices of the school community – students, school counsellors, teachers and administrators. I later discovered from Yin (2003) that this term is also similar to the conception of comparative case studies and multiple case studies. Although they were sometimes used interchangeably, I learned that multiple case studies are more appropriate to be applied for quantitative study since they derive from a positivistic approach that implies the element of replication and generalisability. Hence, I chose the term ‘collective case study’ because it is more appropriate for qualitative study as well as fitting the purpose of my research, that is, to understand the phenomena from different perspectives with a degree of cross-checking between research participants.

### **Research setting and research participants**

I chose to conduct my study in one national secondary school in Peninsular Malaysia. It was a co-educational<sup>5</sup> urban secondary school located on the outskirts of Selangor, (West Malaysia), comprising more than 3000 students of different racial backgrounds. This school consisted of two sessions – morning and afternoon. The description of the school setting and participants will be explained further in Chapters Four and Five. This school was selected on the basis of the appropriateness of its samples particularly students which comprised the three predominant racial groups in Malaysia; namely, the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The quality of the samples provided a beneficial and meaningful way to thoroughly understand their values and attitudes towards school guidance and counselling. The sampling strategies involved convenience sampling for the participant observations and purposive (Patton, 2002) for the individual and group interviews. This strategy met my needs in which I only selected particular settings, persons or events to provide important information. Initially, my intended plan was to

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<sup>5</sup> A combination of female and male students

select referred clients and school counsellors as the main participants in the study because I wanted to observe their participation in counselling activities as well as conducting interviews with them. However, I acknowledged the comments given by one of the upgrade panels during my upgrade meeting to consider the involvement of other groups of students. This will provide a holistic understanding of values towards the service as well as overcoming the biased opinion that might arise if the issue was only prompted from one group of students only.

## **Research procedure and ethical considerations**

### **Research procedure**

Prior to commencement of the study, a range of ethical considerations were taken into account. First, I had had a meeting with a colleague at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, to discuss and document a set of ethical procedures to be adhered to throughout conducting my research. This process is a requirement stipulated by upgrade committees preceding my upgrade meeting.

Equally important to the initiation of the study is obtaining the approval to conduct research in Malaysia. I had obtained an approval from the Economic Planning Unit (EPU), based at the Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia, a prerequisite for Malaysians and overseas researchers conducting research in Malaysia. Initially, I was required to adhere to the research procedure by providing a set of documents incorporating my research proposal, my identification (ID or passport) and a supporting letter from the University (Appendix 3). This procedure enabled the EPU to seek confirmation and feedback from the Education Planning Unit and Research Department (EPRD), (Appendix 1 & 2); Ministry of Education Malaysia on the appropriateness of the research as well as its methodology. Once this division has given its feedback and consent, the EPU had granted the approval to conduct research. The EPU had also provided me with a research pass to secure my entry into the research field. The consent obtained had also allowed me to seek for approval from the Selangor State Education Department to access the intended school. Upon completing



this study, I will need to submit a report of my study as well as return the pass to the EPU.

## **Ethical issues**

### **Issues of confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, trustworthiness and transferability**

Being engaged in and immersed in a narrative ethnography which by nature is embedded in context, required me to be mostly wary of these ethical issues; confidentiality, privacy and anonymity, trustworthiness and transferability on the participants' well beings as well as readers' contextual understanding.

For this study, the ethical issues that were communicated to the respective school administrators and counsellors through a letter and verbal conversation included the following:

- a) Signing the informed consent forms (Appendix7), in which there was an agreement between the participants and I that their names and school's address are kept confidential.
- b) Giving back the thesis report to the school.

To ensure the confidentiality, privacy and anonymity of the participants and place, I used pseudonyms in the transcript and throughout this thesis to replace participants' name and place that might identify them.

In relation to data protection, I complied fully with the requirements of current data protection legislation, Data Protection Act (1998) University of Bristol. I ensure that no others have had the access to the data as I transcribed the tapes myself and stored the data securely on the password protected server.

In regard with the issues of trustworthiness and transferability, I am particularly cautious that the research procedures, processes and the information given were appropriately adhered and communicated. At the same time, ensuring the sufficient information of the context and background of the study which both might be

transferable to the readers in another context is of paramount importance to me. In addition, providing sufficient information could develop critical insights to other contexts in which the readers can critically engage in. Therefore, these pertinent issues will be thoughtfully communicated throughout the entire thesis.

## **Summary**

I regard that my adoption of constructivism – interpretivism as vital for me to achieve the aim of my study. It provides a framework for my attempt to understand values towards counselling and students' attitudes on whether or not to seek counselling as a therapeutic means of education. Ultimately, the philosophical approach towards counselling would in effect strengthen cultures, subcultures and communities, and at the same time allow the participants to effectively understand their values and needs of their own cultural groups. A narrative ethnographic case study approach was therefore employed as a means to understand participants' values towards the counselling service. In my research, all the complexities of the social-cultural world were given ample room to emerge, to be investigated and understood by me. My ultimate aim is to provide a research that expands the experience of its readers and contribute, through the readers' awareness, to a more culturally sensitive practice (Moodley, 1999). The following chapter illustrates the way I explored these possibilities.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **“MY ETHNOGRAPHIC ENDEAVOUR – ENTERING THE UNKNOWN”**

#### **Introduction**

Being immersed in and understanding other people’s cultural worlds can be the most rewarding or frustrating experience in life. I regard my ultimate achievement in a research endeavour as when I am able to empathise and understand others outside the experience of my usual relationships and life story. Nevertheless, the journey towards understanding others is not as easy as it appears. It takes a huge effort to persuade strangers to share their joys, pains, speculations and ambiguities. Being an ethnographer might open the door to various kinds of challenges that can raise my adrenalin levels. Furthermore, it is like taking my own journey, trying out risks and opportunities. In deciding the path, I cannot deny, but have to accept, the needs and the importance of venturing into this business. Immersing myself into a narrative ethnographic case study approach could lead me towards the construction of new knowledge and useful insights. This chapter discusses my journey entering the unknown place. This entails all sorts of mixed feelings upon embarking as well as navigating my position in the midst of this encounter.

#### **“Negotiating my entry”**

I regard school environments and my career life as inextricably connected. It was considered a usual task for me as a counsellor educator in a public university for the past five years to provide supervision for counsellor trainees in secondary schools across Peninsular Malaysia. At the beginning of each academic term, every lecturer in my department would be assigned to supervise approximately ten trainee counsellors. It is considered a normal procedure for a final year undergraduate student in Guidance and Counselling to undertake their internships for 14 weeks as part of the requirements for the award of degree in Education, specialising in Guidance and Counselling. Each secondary school will receive two trainee counsellors at one time, and they will undergo

two different assessments conducted by a supervisor in the second and last week of their internships. The trainees are required to carry out guidance activities and to accomplish 145 hours of counselling sessions. During the assessment, they need to perform live individual and group counselling sessions before their supervisors. Normally these assessments last for four hours, of which two hours are allocated for the student to do the required tasks.

I still remember my experience when I conducted students' placement supervision at one school. From my initial point of view, I regarded this school as typical of any school that I had visited. I anticipated that it was going to be a common counselling supervision with stereotypical individual and group counselling sessions. Also I expected that nothing out of the ordinary would occur, except meeting new school counsellors as well as my counsellor trainees whom I had not yet had the chance to teach. After having a quick discussion with the head counsellor, who at that time was a Chinese woman, I was immensely surprised to learn that there were six counsellors in this school. The large number of counsellors signified that this school was occupied by almost 3000 students, as the rule set by the Ministry of Education Malaysia allocated a ratio of one counsellor for every 500 students (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2009). In four years of being a supervisor, this was the first school in which I had ever encountered such a large number of counsellors indicating a correspondingly large number of students. It contained a vast multiracial student population with the majority being Chinese, followed by a lower proportion of Indian, with the rest Malays as a minority group. I was so amazed by the variety of counselling cases arising from these different backgrounds of students. There were many peculiarities in the cases presented by clients that had distinguished them from cases in other schools. Thus, I could see the potential for cultural variations that contributed to the uniqueness of the cases presented. At that time, I was saying to myself that if I had a chance to undertake research, I would surely select this school for further study.

Little did I imagine that I would return to this school. My return was prompted by my PhD journey that focuses on multicultural counselling. As soon as my research topic was approved, there was no other school that stood out as suitable for the research within its multiracial population. I anticipated that this school could bring me much in

the way of cultural resources that could be very informative. As a counsellor educator, I was interested to observe how students regard the role of school counsellors, as well as their attitudes towards counselling services. Would the result be similar to previous quantitative findings, or would this school create a different picture?

As a relatively new researcher, I was naturally anxious. Although I was eager to understand students' values and attitudes towards counselling services in the school, the issue of power in relationships kept haunting me. I kept thinking how to bridge the power differentials between the research participants and me. How would I approach the students and school community? Would they be happy to be interviewed? How would the school counsellors perceive me? Would my existence intimidate and alter how the school counsellors work? How would they regard me, as they had previously known me as a lecturer in a public university? Would I be able to confront and overcome my fears?

As I struggled with these questions, I discovered that my fears were partly based on personal experience and doubts about my ability to deal with secondary school students who are culturally different from me. I realised that I had less experience working with younger students, as I had spent most of my teaching years with older students between the ages of 18 and 30. My fears were heightened, as I needed to adapt myself to working with students of different racial backgrounds; a situation which I had never experienced before. I had my primary and secondary education in a Malay community with little exposure to other ethnic and cultural groups or their languages and dialects.

Further reflections uncovered even more fears and took me back to my experience in conducting research. Although I have vast experience of supervising undergraduate dissertations, I must admit that most of these studies were undertaken quantitatively. Furthermore, I have also devoted myself to the projects that develop findings based on numbers and figures to produce generalised observations and rules. I had little experience of undertaking research directed towards appreciating the uniqueness of groups and individuals specifically by giving due attention to different experiences and voices. Although my experience as a counsellor and counselling supervisor used qualitative methods analogous to qualitative research, I regard these two skills as two

different worlds, although they may share some of the same characteristics. Was I courageous enough to embark on these painstaking processes of ethnographic research that I had not previously encountered?

Yet, something from deep inside kept gnawing at me, urging me to challenge myself to discover things outside my usual experience. I needed to give myself a chance to immerse in the unfamiliar and become a native in an unfamiliar environment. Thus, having the opportunity to become a research doctoral student lifted my spirit. I was thankful and glad that I had finally managed to get the opportunity to find my own research direction, and specifically conducting a narrative ethnography. During my previous involvement conducting research, I had sensed my detachment from the research participants. I did not even manage to see their faces, let alone be immersed in their lives, as I just handed over the questionnaires to be administered by their teachers. The only thing that I left was several tokens as appreciation for participating in my study. My intention at that time was merely to accomplish the research task without knowing whether they had answered the questionnaire honestly or just for the sake of completing the required task. Although I managed to obtain my career promotion as a result of the research accomplishment, my soul appeared to be left empty. I did not get enough satisfaction as I realised that I had missed the relational aspects of how people interact through an impersonal approach to behaviour. I felt that I did not do them sufficient justice as I had not given them enough space to speak in their own voices. Now, I think this is the right time for me to do so by allowing them sufficient room to express their experiences and concerns more freely. With this in mind, I was hoping that my mission in this journey could lead me to a new experience towards obtaining an understanding of students' attitudes to counselling services in the school landscape. On 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2009, I headed calmly to the school to undertake a novel role. Yes, I was portraying myself as an ethnographer, which I considered a big challenge, but a manageable role for me.

## **“Taking my first step”**

It has been three years since I previously visited this town. Yet I was able to recognise it as there were not many changes in its structure, except for the rapid development of its surrounding area. After having a long, 45-minute, journey through a busy expressway, I then took the interchange from the toll plaza, which took about 15 minutes heading to the school. I could see lots of buildings like factories, shop lots and offices on the right and left side of the road. It is considered a developing town, as it is located in a suburban area of the capital city of Malaysia. Famous for its relationship with tin mining, it has fast shifted to become a developing industrial area. The former mining lands are now quarries, which provide rocks and other products for the rapidly-growing housing industry here. Connected to Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia and the rest of the Klang Valley by the North-South Expressway, these emerging townships are becoming popular as the houses here are more affordable than in other parts of the valley. Due to the increasing number of urbanites, the roads are no longer ‘traffic jam proof’. I was so lucky that I managed to escape the jam as I left home during off-peak hour.

Along the way, I could not help but notice the intimidating presence of a huge cement factory. It has provided employment for many of the towns’ inhabitants since long before other industries had grown. I learned that many of its community, including schoolchildren, depend on the train and bus services to take them to work or school in the city. It has about nine primary schools and eight secondary schools. Apart from having a structured residential area and integrated industrial park, this town is considered furnished as it is well served with a complete package of amenities nearby, such as a bus station, hypermarkets, police station, Buddhist and Indian temples, as well as a recreational park.

It was a typically beautiful day when I first reached the school at nine o’clock on a Monday morning. I decided to park my car outside the main gate as I found it was fully closed. As I opened my car’s window I could feel the slight cool of the morning breeze. It was so fresh and delicately scented, like the orange blossom perfume of my car. It lifted up my mood. I was hoping that the day would be fruitful for me. Although it was

still early in the day, I could see the ray of the morning sunshine shining through a gap in the cloud. I glanced up to the sky and saw a completely blue sky with only little patches of dark clouds. I took a couple of minutes relaxing and watching the school situation from my car. I was aware that the classroom's lesson had started about two hours ago, as the formal start time was at 7.20 a.m. I could see from afar that some teachers were dedicatedly teaching the students in the classroom. The loud sound of their voices might indicate their huge commitment to their duty. There were four teachers quickly heading out from one building near the entrance. Two of them dispersed in an opposite direction. I guessed they were heading towards their respective classrooms. I then came out of my car and headed towards the main gate. I noticed there was another gate, which was situated at the far corner of the school compound. When I pulled the gate, it was not locked. I then took myself straight to the administrative building in anticipation of meeting the school principal. In the midst of walking, I was disturbed by a husky voice coming from behind me. Immediately I turned myself and realised that there was a man calling me to come over to a small wooden building which was located about five metres away from the main gate. He was a tall, smart man in his late 50s. I noticed he was wearing a full grey guard's uniform. It clearly stated the word 'security' and the name of the company that employed him. His moustache was quite noticeable to me, as it resembled an Indian policeman in most Tamil and Hindi movies. I was quite intimidated at first with his stern look when he asked me to provide an identity card. After filling in detailed information and explaining my intention, he gave me a card indicating the word 'visitor'. Before I made my move, he advised me to return the card when I had finished meeting the school principal.

Along the way to the principal's room, I could see the teachers' cars were tightly packed in an extremely cramped parking space. It seemed to be an unorganised parking space, since all the cars were double-parked. The school appeared to have two distinct double-storey medium buildings that were tightly positioned against each other in a relatively small site. There was also a medium-sized multipurpose hall located at the left end corner of these buildings. They remained the same as when I had previously visited.

Reading through the school's organisation chart, which was hung outside the main office room, I discovered that there was a new Malay woman principal who had



replaced the previous Chinese female principal. Unfortunately, I could not see her, since she was off-site attending a meeting. Consequently, I was asked to see the senior assistant principal, to whom I described the purpose of my visit and handed over my official permission letter. I was glad that she seemed positive about my research, as she was aware of the importance and potential benefits of the issue that I was about to research. Listening to the number of school counsellors, I was shocked for the second time as I learned that the student enrolment had increased since the last time I visited the school. There were eight counsellors altogether: five counsellors in the morning session and three in the afternoon session. She appeared to read my mind as she mentioned instantaneously that the school was currently having a problem of being overcrowded with students. "It is considered a tradition for parents to send their children here, and in this situation we do not have any choice except to allow them to settle in this school," she added. I just nodded indicating my sympathetic feeling towards her. After submitting the official permission letter from the Ministry of Education, I headed towards the counselling unit.

The unit was located in the same place as the previous time I was here. There was an arrow pointing in the direction of the unit that was situated at the right end of the first floor of the administrative building. The administrative building was on the ground floor, and consisted of three interconnected rooms. Before reaching upstairs, I had to pass through the staff room, which was placed in between the office and the discipline unit. There was also a small stationery shop at the right end corner of the building, which sells stationery items as well as providing photocopy services to students at discounted prices. Just after the stairs, there was a paved way leading to the school canteen. There was also a vending machine placed just beside the stair entrance, which sells a choice of soft drinks. As soon as I placed my foot on the last step on the stairway leading to the unit, I bumped into one man who was busy heading downstairs. We were both bewildered and astonished at this encounter. He was a tall young Indian man who wore glasses and was dressed in a nice smart shirt with matching maroon tie and black trousers. I instantly remembered his name and recognised him as a former exceptionally brilliant student of mine. I could have jumped with joy as soon as he mentioned that he had been here for about two weeks. He had just finished his internship and had been posted as a new school counsellor here. I was so relieved to see him, whom I knew I

could depend on to help with the research and find suitable participants. My pleasure at seeing him lowered my personal defences.

It was not difficult to find the unit, as it was located at the end of the row of the three classrooms. As I walked along the corridor, with the classrooms on my left, I could see there was no teacher in two of the classrooms. The students appeared to be noisy and playing around hysterically. My presence, walking along the corridor, had not compelled them to become quiet. The faces of Indian students were quite noticeable in these classrooms. Without much ado, I then headed to my destination that was just a few metres away. Just before I reached the unit, I could see a teacher was passionately teaching students in the classroom beside it. Through a glimpse into the classroom, and the sound of students reciting the Quran verses, I learned that she was teaching an Islamic education subject. I continued walking and reached the unit.

As soon as I reached the unit, I was warmly greeted by one counsellor who introduced herself as Madam Fazura, one of the senior counsellors. I learned that she was alone in the unit at that time as she informed me that the three other counsellors were busy handling programmes at the school's main hall. I noticed her warm characteristic as she spoke nicely and provided me with abundant information about this unit.

I noticed that the unit was of a usual size, as I had seen before. It looked like a one-and-a-half sized classroom. I could see six compartmented rooms that stood on either side of a relatively wide central hall. The room on my right near the front door seemed to be the biggest among them. Subsequently I learned that it was allocated for the head of school counsellor. Unfortunately I could not meet her as she was away attending a course and would only return the next day. Through its wide window pane, I could see many facilities provided in the room. There was one computer set at the left corner of the room, which was facing a whiteboard filled with a few lists of scheduled programmes. There was one wooden shelf situated at the end corner of the room on which were placed various ring-binder files. They were all nicely arranged in uniform grey-coloured files. The room was quite comfortable in terms of its facilities, as I could see a large glass-covered table with a few books on it. There was a blue-coloured executive-type chair positioned near the table.

I observed five other rooms that were a similar size to each other, but considerably smaller in comparison to the previously mentioned room. As all doors of these remaining rooms were left open, I could see that the second room and fourth room on my right contained only basic furniture like a wooden desk, a chair, and also a whiteboard displaying lists of scheduled programmes. The third room, however, was slightly different in its structure. It was filled with a set of computers and a small sink at the middle end of the room for communal use. I could see that the shelf for files adjacent to the computer table made the room very cramped. I learned from Madam Fazura that these three rooms (second, third and fourth room) were allocated for counsellors in the afternoon school session. As I observed the rooms, I could see only the fifth room; the second from my left was the second largest after the head of counsellor's room as it was accommodated with two desks, chairs and shelves. I later learned that this room belonged to Madam Fazura, who shared with another female counsellor known as Madam Rohaya. These two rooms (fourth and fifth) were separated by one tiny storeroom that contained much equipment and materials for counselling programmes. I could see used banners, polystyrenes, and three tins of green, yellow and red paints stocked up that area.

Finally, the sixth room which was the smallest among all, on the far left was occupied with only two chairs for individual counselling, along with two bookshelves and piles of files. I could see many psychological inventories were neatly arranged in several files. Comparing the number of rooms and the counsellors, I noticed that this unit had experienced a shortage of room as I saw there were two desks and chairs in the left narrow corner of the unit. I was later informed by Madam Fazura that these two counsellors (in the morning session) - one male and one female - were left with no rooms. I could see a tall electric fan had been placed in between this furniture.

As I observed the hall, I could see four colourful, inspirational and informative posters pasted on the wall, right in front of and behind the counsellors' seats. They contained lots of information for students about study skills, truancy prevention, personality and career choices, as well as the dos and don'ts of the school's disciplinary procedures. It was a great pleasure also to see facilities provided in this unit like two sets of red-coloured jacquard patterns of comfortable settees on the left and right side of the hall. As I moved to the middle of the unit's hall, there was a 21-inch television placed in a

small cabinet that was located between the fourth and the fifth rooms. Behind the television set, there was a big orange-coloured board pasted on the wall, containing a counsellors' hierarchical organisational chart and their roles in the school. As I scrutinised the board, I came to understand that each counsellor was assigned to lead various clubs in this unit, which include PRS (*Pembimbing Rakan Sebaya* or Peers Counselling Club), PROSTAR (*Program Sihat Tanpa AIDS untuk Remaja* –AIDS prevention club) and SLAD (*Skim Lencana Anti Dadah* or drug awareness badge scheme, caters for every school uniform club). As I further observed the room, my eyes fell on one small plastic white shelf beside the television cabinet. I saw numerous piles of leaflets, brochures and prospectuses of private and public universities, including requirements and specifications for enrolment. They were systematically arranged so that the students could read and refer to them according to their interest.

As I was observing around the unit, I stumbled upon two familiar faces who had just entered the unit's hall. Both of them immediately screamed with pleasure upon seeing me as they were my former students. This was considered a memorable moment for me as I had not worked with so many of my former students in one place before. Although I was their lecturer, I now regarded them as the experts in their fields. Our relationship of lecturer and student was reversed, as I was about to learn something from them. Indeed, I was very happy and proud that I would see them undertaking their actual role as school counsellors.

During the day, I spent a considerable amount of time talking to Madam Fazura regarding the counselling situation in this school. She expressed her opinion about different types of students' behaviour where Indian students were perceived as more problematic in comparison with the Chinese. As we spoke, I observed other activities taking place in the counselling room. There were about eight male students, two Malays and Chinese students and four Indians, waiting for their counsellors to join them for group counselling. According to her, they were clients referred for counselling for help with various attitudinal problems, most notably resulting in playing truant, fighting and being members of gangs.

As I observed the crowd, my eyes had hooked to one Malay boy. Among the crowd, he stood out as the most well-behaved boy as he sat quietly and rarely used his voice. I wondered why and what had brought him here. My curiosity was growing, which led me to draw closer to him. I did not know what caught my attention as I realised that I had invited him to sit next to me on a red sofa at the left end corner of the hall. At first, I thought he would have to say no. I thought he would ignore me. If he declined, this could happen because I was a stranger. However my notion was totally wrong. He was not only willing to sit beside me but also poured out what he wanted to say. His positive reaction encouraged me to chat with him, though at the back of my mind, I was monitoring my interaction. I knew that I should make him feel comfortable enough to speak with me. I needed to be very cautious in posing non- threatening but manageable questions, and tried as much as I could to be less formal and act like in a usual friendly conversation. I think this was one of the appropriate ways for me to reach out to the participants, since all of them were referred clients.

He was a skinny 16-year-old boy with a dark skin complexion, which resembles a typical Malay boy. He came for the group counselling after being referred by the counsellor. He told me that he had skipped school for quite some time. However, I did not intend to explore in any depth this issue, as I knew it was improper for me to do so in this very initial stage. Instead, I just focused my attention by establishing a non-threatening conversation. I wanted to experience what it would be like to mingle with students. As a newcomer in this school, I tried to gain as much knowledge as I could in the school's environment. I realised I needed to build as much rapport as I could, and at the same time tried to learn ways to approach participants. During the day we talked about the school, especially the classifications of classrooms. I learned from him that they were classified according to gemstones. There were thirteen classrooms in total for each form. He came from the ninth ranked classroom, which was considered among the lowest. I was stunned upon hearing this large number of classrooms and struggled for a while to remember all of their names.

I also had the opportunity to get to know the name of the school building by flipping through the school magazine, which I found on a table in the counselling room. I came to realise that currently the school has a total of eight building blocks, which are named

alphabetically based on the names of flowers. I began to appreciate the population of the school. It was considered as a grade 'A' school as its population exceeded more than 1000 students. I learned that the school was led by one school principal and five school administrators, along with a few support staff. Categorised as an urban school with the population of more than 3000 students, it appeared to be disproportionate in terms of racial groups, in which Chinese was considered the majority while Indians remained the second largest group, with Malays forming the minority group. As I analysed the document, I found that the school also experienced an uneven proportion in terms of the gender of its teachers. There was only 20 percent of male teacher as compared to female in this school. Additionally, I was interested to learn that this school was guided by its own vision to be renowned as an excellent day-school in all its aspects by trying to strike the balance between its curricular as well as extracurricular achievements.

Someone who was standing outside the school would probably see this concrete building as very ordinary. Its distinct structure, coloured with typical cream and grey, was similar to many other schools. Its population, particularly female and male students, formed a familiar image as they were dressed in similar white tops and dark blue trousers (for male) or light blue sarongs or pinafore (for female) as a standard national school uniform. The combination of familiar buildings and students' style of dress might suggest a school like any other in Malaysia. People might see nothing interesting out of the normal everyday rhythm and speed of students' life and their community. From the inside, I was starting to get glimpses of what makes this school extraordinary beneath the concrete and cream colour of these eight building blocks. I was looking forward to discovering more of what makes it distinctive, and becoming an insider as I observed the interactions among the counselling service and the staff and students.

## CHAPTER 5

### “UNFOLDING THE TALES OF THE FIELD”

*An onion is an illuminating bulb, but only by peeling its many layers, can one reveal whether it has a sweet heart or a rotten core.*

(Casnig, 2003)

#### **Introduction**

My journey continues to reach the most complicated and painstaking part of the research process. Managing and analysing other people's stories demands serious intellectual and moral responsibility (Mannen, 1988). As a researcher, I am aware that the act of unfolding cultural fabrics of others entails wisdom and accountability. I needed to attend to them in a most respectful manner, otherwise I would bring them into what Charmaz and Mitchell (2001, p. 160) called “a quick and dirty analysis of qualitative research”. I regard these processes as involving acts that go beyond mere descriptions. It is like peeling an onion. In order to maintain the intact shape of the onion, careful removal of its layers of skin is required. Hence, the analysis process involves gently peeling the layers of data, layers of interpretation, layers of emotion, and layers of meaning by reflexively asking the why and what questions in order to search for the deeper meaning. Furthermore, it entails looking closer into the data, not accepting the problem at face value but persistently searching for the underlying causes. I regard my data analysis as iteratively ongoing until the full stop of the final chapter. This chapter illustrates the processes undertaken by me which started from identifying participants, conducting interviews and observations, producing a transcription, translating and establishing the research themes.

#### **Conducting individual and group interview**

As an educator, I always believe in the co-construction process of knowledge with students as it helps improve my practice. Similar practice was also applied when I conducted this research using several in-depth interview processes. I understood through the explanation from Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003, p.140) that this type of

interview was actually led by the influence of postmodernism and constructionism, which encourage the construction of knowledge and relationship with the participants. I also agreed with Kvale (1996) who regards the researcher as a traveller involved in a co-construction and negotiation process along the journey with the participants. As an outsider, I wanted to learn from them, and tried as much as I could to comprehend their contextual situations better.

I was indebted to the school principal as she allowed me to conduct the research in this school. Prior to the research process, I had earlier discussed my research plan with the head of school counsellor who provided me with background information about the nature of students in this school. I was informed by her that the school principal had granted permission for all counsellors to issue a letter (that contains details of the student's specific name and his or her classroom) for the purpose of obtaining permission from the respective classroom's teacher for this research. Upon receiving the required information of participants especially the referred ones, such as the names and the specific classroom, I made an attempt to approach these students by myself and requested them to be my participants.

Although the participants, (especially the referred clients), were among those who were recommended by counsellors, they were given a choice to either participate in or withdraw from the study. Prior to the process, I took the initiative to brief them about the nature of the study, including the ethical issues such as anonymity, confidentiality, and the recording process as well as informed consent forms to be signed. The same ethical procedure was also carried out with other participants including counsellors, schoolteachers and administrators.

At this stage, lowering my position and privileging them as participants seemed to play a considerable role in bringing their participation. Consequently, they felt honoured when I iterated my intention to learn about the school situation as well as seek their views about the school counselling services. To this end, the participants were keenly aware of the importance of this study, as well as the significance of their participation.

Becoming a qualitative researcher taught me to become realistic and ever ready to prepare for the unexpected. Prior to the fieldwork, I had carefully planned what I was supposed to do. Yet, when I set foot on the actual scene, it did not prove to be what I



expected. Initially, I planned to conduct an individual interview with each of my target students in order to overcome the possibility of the ‘bandwagon effect’ such as peer pressure, and to provide an opportunity for each individual to contribute personal perceptions and understanding of worldviews. Unfortunately, during my fieldwork, I only managed to have individual interviews with two of my target groups. I discovered that there were groups of students who displayed considerable reluctance to have an individual interview. Instead of letting them go, I made alternative arrangements by offering them the opportunity of a group interview. As a result, they have shown their bravery, and invited peers of the same group to come along. Considered to be less structured in comparison to focus groups (Davies, 2008), this type of interview enabled the participants to interact with me as well as with members of the group. I could sense that they became actively involved as the discussions were held in a relaxed and low-stress environment. At that time, I realised the importance of conducting group interviews among students who have cultural or contextual factors in common. This matches Kruger’s experience (1994) who mentions that this type of interview could lessen the level of participants’ anxieties by giving them more room to express their voices in a less threatening situation. I also agreed with Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p. 287) who mention the appropriateness of conducting group interviews with children as it is considered less intimidating than individual interviews. Although my participants were adolescents, their hesitation about being involved with individual interviews suggested a sense of vulnerability comparable to people much younger.

In contrast, I was unable to arrange a group interview with the school counsellors as I had previously planned. I hoped that I could persuade them to share their stories and experiences as a collective group. I had anticipated that there would be many responses prompted in response to any individual’s issues. However, juggling with many responsibilities in school counselling services made their timetables fully booked. They could not promise me specific times as they had many *ad hoc* tasks awaiting them. Nevertheless, my inability to see counsellors as a group did not prevent me from obtaining information from them, as I discerned that our personal encounters turned out to be fruitful discussions. I came to appreciate that the individual interviews enabled them to express their voices freely. They could share their stories about school

counselling services personally. I could see their enthusiasm to share their experiences by looking at their glowing eyes.

Although I previously concentrated on conducting interviews and observations with students and school counsellors as my main participants, I came to learn that the involvement of other parties was also critical. As my fieldwork progressed, I sensed that there were many local issues concerning school ethos and processes highlighted by students and school counsellors. In an attempt to grasp the whole story, I made the decision to include other units of the school community, such as teachers and school administrators, as participants. In this situation, I realised that I was actually applying theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006) to my study in order to fill the gap within the data as well as to saturate the categories. Although teachers and school administrators were not considered to be my intended participants in the first place, I came to recognise that their voices were essential and integral to this study. They could contribute towards understanding students' values towards school counselling services at the macro level. At this stage, I agree with Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) that research design in ethnography cannot be pre-determined as this methodology requires being open to unexpected things.

There were 11 individual interviews and one group interview of referred clients, three individual interviews and one group interview of self-referred clients, and two group interviews of those uninvolved in counselling. I also managed to interview seven school counsellors consisting of six Malay females and one Indian male. There were also five school administrators involved in my study. They consisted of one Malay female school principal, one female senior curricular and administrative school assistant, one senior assistant of students' affairs, one senior assistant of extra curricular activities and the head of the discipline unit, who were all males. Approaching school teachers posed my greatest challenge as I only managed to approach two female teachers, an Indian and Malay, to be interviewed. My effort to conduct individual interviews with Chinese teachers proved futile when they displayed their reluctance to offer their cooperation. They reported the pressure of teaching and administrative work as the reason for their hesitation to be interviewed. By the end of the journey of data collection, I managed to approach a total of 57 participants, consisting of 27 individual interviews, four group interviews and ten casual conversations. Most of them were interviewed on one or three

occasions depending on their time and involvement in the study. The process of hunting for participants came to an end as soon as I reached the point of data saturation in my analysis. For the purpose of data presentation, I only selected those significant participants as they provided a variety of meaningful stories. The range of participants is summarised in the Appendix 13.

I made the decision to conduct all the interviews in Malay language as all schools in Malaysia employ the Malay language as a medium of instruction. Moreover, I found all the participants in this study could converse and understand this language very well. Being a large community in one national school, all students are encouraged to converse in this language as part of inculcating the spirit of unity and uniformity among different racial backgrounds. I found Indian students could converse better in this language in comparison with Chinese students. Nonetheless Chinese students gave their full cooperation in the interview sessions despite having slight language differences.

Following practices originally based in hermeneutic philosophy, I applied semi-structured and unstructured interviews to give an opportunity to the participants to express their own words in an attempt to explore and understand their experiences and behaviour in their own context (Seidman, 1998). During the interview process, especially with students, I had related my questions to their life stories because I believed their cultural values are indirectly embedded in their own background experiences. This is in line with Josselson (2007, p. 540) who stated “if one wants to know how a particular experience is interwoven in a participant’s life, narrative research technique often mandates asking about the life rather than the experience”. I also considered myself to be open and receptive to unexpected information from the interviewee, because I believed participants hold lots of life experience yet to be discovered. As stated by Seidman (1998, p.5) “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience”. Therefore, my decision to highlight stories was considered a useful means to penetrate into the lived experience of my participants. I believed that they themselves own a particular experience and understand their situation better than any other person.

I have five different sets of interview guides intended for different groups of participants within the school community (Appendices 8, 9, 10 & 11). My interview

guides were mainly comprised of open-ended questions so as to allow the participant more room to craft their own interpretations and answers, and subsequently “describe their perspectives in their own words” (Lietaer, 1992, p. 495). This matter is highlighted by Hollway and Jefferson (1997, p. 57), when they both mentioned that “the key concepts in each question did not always elicit different stories; however, the different frames of questions meant that people could elaborate different associations to the same memory”. I further agreed with Nunkoosing (2005, p. 699) that “an interview owns a power in a sense that it can persuade the interviewees to generate their own thinking and ultimately gain insight into their own needs and behaviour”. By attending to their problem in their own context, I hoped to promote genuine responses, and thus contribute to the trustworthiness of the study.

Apart from formal interviews, I also approached the participants, especially school counsellors, teachers and administrators, with formal as well as informal interviews in order to discover commonalities and differences in their views, as well as to triangulate the data. Moreover, as noted by Fetterman (1998, p.38) “informal interviews are considered the easiest way to conduct and also help to establish and maintain a healthy rapport”.

Nevertheless, conducting interviews with students (other than Malays) posed some challenges for me as I needed to ensure that they understood the questions. Realising these difficulties, my questions contained only a minimal use of colloquial phrases so as to increase their level of comprehension and confidence. Sometimes I requested clarification in order to understand their contextual situation. It was important for me to do this, as this informed how I constructed my subsequent response. For example, one Indian boy tried to describe the cause of punishment that he received at school. At first, it was a bit difficult for me to understand his meaning. He just provided me with a short form of expression by way of explanation “*because I wore ‘Cantona’*” assuming that I understood the meaning. I was puzzled for quite a while, working out what he meant. After seeking his explanation, I realised that he had received punishment as a result of him wearing a revealing t-shirt inside the school uniform that spelled the word “*Cantona*”. He explained to me that he was a die-hard fan of Eric Cantona, a former football player for Manchester United. Indeed, it was a great experience talking to

different types of students as I could understand their unique worlds and learn their phrases.

At the end of the journey, I had piles of interview recordings and field notes waiting to be transcribed. According to Roulston (2010), before attempting to produce a transcription, one should take account of: the theoretical implication underlying the interview, the analysis process, data representation and requirement for the participants' access to the study. In doing the transcription process, I am mostly indebted to NVivo 8 software as it enabled me to transcribe and store my data in a systematic way. I chose to selectively transcribe the interview by abandoning certain aspects, such as pauses, intonation, and emotional expressions, as I did not intend to analyse the participants' conversations in great detail, or to carry out the discourse or conversation analysis where a detailed transcript is needed (Gibbs, 2007, p.11). However I took into account those personal expressions that appeared to be significant by putting them into my field notes as part of my reflexive processes. Finally, I transformed the transcriptions into a more formal written style in order to ensure ease of readers' understanding.

I was guided by Kvale and Brinkman (2009) who mentions the delicate process of transcription as it involves the shift from the spoken context of an interview to the typed transcript. Conducting research is therefore not solely about protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, but also preventing the transcribed word from being misinterpreted. To ensure that I was not "lost in the transcription" (Bourdieu, 1999, p.622), I kept reminding myself about the purpose of the study and tried to bring the context together during the process. Hence, I agreed with Gibbs (2007) that the issue is not about the accuracy of the transcript but more on being meticulous in making a transcription. I selected passages for this level of transcription after listening to whole interviews and reflecting on them repeatedly.

After the painstaking processes of transcribing, I made a decision to pursue the coding and analysis manually, as I felt more comfortable analysing my data using pen and paper rather than by electronic means. It took approximately three months for me to finish the task. Although I found this to be an exhausting process, I felt close to the data. As I read the transcripts and listened to the tapes repeatedly, I began to identify the initial codes to represent the data. During the transcription process, I could vividly

remember and reflect my experiences while interviewing the participants. I felt as if I was intensely re-living the conversations with my interviewees at that point.

### **“Drowning in a sea of data”**

Data analysis as addressed by Gibbs (2007, p. 1) implies a “transformation as it involves processing data into clear, understandable, insightful, trustworthy, original and analytical procedures”. As a novice qualitative researcher, I admit that I could not comprehend the process well in the beginning. It took me several months to find my direction. The journey towards achieving those sets of criteria led me into several attempts at analysis. At first, I was bombarded with an abundance of data. I was overwhelmed with so many ways to manage and analyse them. I went through many suggestions from authors like Boyatzis (1998), Clandinin and Conneley (2000), and Riessman (2008) in an attempt to search for the best possible way to address my data. I tried to find a systematic way to arrange the multiple voices of participants as well as to present their stories in the best possible way. But none of these authors’ suggestions appeared to fit my aim. It led me to a different series of frustrations.

In the beginning I thought that narrative analysis would be a suitable method for me to achieve the research aim. It is undeniable that there are several narrative principles that appealed to me as if they cater for a holistic context-specific process that involves constructions of peoples’ stories around their life experiences (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2007). Narrative analysis would enable me to obtain an in-depth understanding of how a school community constructed meaning out of their experiences in school counselling services. However, it was difficult for me to analyse my data in terms of a unified structure, as it consists of multiple case studies of different units of participants. Therefore, I turned my navigation to find another appropriate direction that suited the nature of my data.

My worries started to diminish after reading Charmaz and Mitchell (2008), Charmaz (2006), Gibbs (2007) and Harvey (2010) who propose the application of the constructivist grounded theory approach. I was relieved that finally I had gained an insight, and started to see ways to deal with my data. As my research approach builds

upon constructivist methods which assume the existence of multiple realities, and co-construction of knowledge, I discerned that it was well suited to being analysed using the principle of constructivist grounded theory as espoused by Charmaz (2006). However, in choosing an appropriate method, Charmaz reminds me that method is “only a means, not an end” (p.161). The most important thing according to her and Hall and Callery (2001) is how I manage to interact with the data reflexively and responsibly (Hall & Callery, 2001). She mentions that this approach differs from the predecessors of grounded theory; Strauss and Corbin (1990), Glaser (1992) which respectively are more positivistic and post-positivistic by nature. Constructivist grounded theory, which is positioned at the latter end of its methodological spiral, actively proposes a co-construction process and meaning-making with the participants (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006a; 2006b; Mills, Chapman, Bonner & Francis, 2006). Hence, the themes and categories that emerged were as a result of my active interaction with the data and evolved in part as the interviews progressed.

I consider that understanding cultural values towards school guidance and counselling using constructivist grounded theory would be more constructive and helpful to counselling practitioners and policy-makers because of its holistic explanation (Harvey, 2010; Toscano, 2006). Moreover, narrative analysis often lacks the capacity to reach analytical explanations about the findings of the study (Cummins, Curtis, Diez-Roux & McIntyre, 2007). A constructivist grounded theory approach to qualitative research, therefore, has the potential to capture the complexity of interactions between individuals through its emerging analytic description.

Incorporating the constant comparative method, proposed by constructivist grounded theory, also helped me to organise the data and subsequently guided my interpretation. This is in accordance with Coffey and Atkinson (1996) who highlight the importance of data organisation as many ethnographers struggle to find connections within their mountains of data. This situation might lead to several problems, such as low-level description and the problems of abandoning the precious data collected. In this sense, I agreed with Fetterman (1998) who argues that “the more organised the ethnographer, the easier is his or her task of making sense of the mountains of data collected in the field” (p. 2).

Employing this principle neither means that I wanted to move my research toward theoretical development, nor to apply the principles of reductionism and rigidity in my analysis. Instead I wanted to obtain a full description and analytical interpretation of the issue. Furthermore, my multiple case studies of different units of participants within one setting are suitable to be analysed using this approach, as it involves the act of comparing data with data from the beginning of the research, data with emerging categories, and between concepts and categories (Charmaz, 2006, p.187). One thing that I really like most about this approach is that besides offering me the opportunity to do systematic and rigorous checking of both data and analysis, it also enabled me to see my data comprehensively as well as at different layers of analysis.

As I reflected the process of my data collection, I came to understand that I was actually adopting the principles of grounded theory at the beginning of my fieldwork. My process of going back to the data and forward into an analysis, and then returning to the field to gather further data (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001) was done in accordance with this principle. The process of obtaining data from the fieldwork ran every day, starting from the first day I went to school in July 2009 until the end of September 2009.

Besides comprehending my analysis within individuals, I was also concerned with the balance within, and cross-case analyses of multiple participant units within the school community, relating to the identification of participants' cultural values formation. My goal for the analysis was achieved through the following processes as suggested by Ayres, Kavanaugh and Knafl (2003).

- a) Identification of themes that shaped participants' values and their attitudes towards counselling.
- b) Delineation of the variation within these themes.
- c) Creation of thematic profiles for each individual participant and the units of participants as a whole.
- d) Differentiation of students' cultural values from different units of the school community as well as their own distinct views towards the service.

In order to display the data, I prepared tables with two columns each; one column for the transcripts and the other for the coding purpose. I began the analysis process firstly



by reading the interview transcripts of each participant in the Malay language so many times as to familiarise myself, as well as to get some feel for the storyline and overall picture including the major and minor stories that were being told within the data (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008). I preferred a manual approach using highlighters to colour code the data. As I read the transcripts, I made notes or highlighted relevant words and phrases that I felt captured important aspects of the data.

Firstly, I began the analysis process by jotting down the initial ideas or concrete categories (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) in the right hand margin of the transcript. I applied line-by-line *in vivo* coding where I mostly used key phrases in the participants' own words (Chesler, 1987). I found these could significantly reflect their views as well as preserve their meanings. Although close attention was paid to the participants' words, I tried to be more analytical and theoretical in applying my interpretations. Known as open coding by Glaser and Strauss (1990), my task in this analysis stage was trying to obtain what was going on in the mind of every single participant. I regarded this process as iterative and exhaustive, yet insightful, as I needed to change my coding categories so many times to provide a clearer picture of the researched issue. In identifying themes or codes, I also took into account the aspect of repetitions found in the transcripts. I identified several statements, for example "counselling room for problematic students", and "counsellors as discipline problem solvers" were repeatedly used by the participants. According to Ryan and Bernard (2003), the more the same concept occurs in a text, the more likely it is a theme (p. 89). I approached the interview transcripts systematically by treating them one by one, based on the listed participant's units within the school community. I began analysing individual transcripts, starting from students, followed by school counsellors, teachers and school administrators. After scrutinising the data, I then formed case summaries or profiles of each individual participant to identify the full range of themes reflected in my sample.

Secondly, I developed a listing of all *in vivo* codes that consisted of shorter code phrases that captured the main idea of what the participants had said. For example, short phrases from school counsellors like "Teachers' negative acceptance", "Lack of infrastructure", "School administrators' negative acceptance" and "Counselling: An object of prejudice and stigma" were applied at this level to simplify what participants meant in their views.

Thirdly, code phrases were reduced by grouping them together into similar codes. In this stage, similar code phrases mentioned in the second step were grouped together to create a cluster with a new category known as “Travelling a rocky road” (see appendices 17, 18, 19 & 20). Categories are classifications of concepts, and are discovered when codes are compared against one another and pertain to a similar phenomenon (Eaves, 2001). It is considered a higher, more abstract order than codes.

At this stage, constant comparison analysis was embedded to compare the similarities and differences that exist among categories and sub-categories. By using this approach, I could examine each item of data coded in terms of a particular category, and note its similarities to other data that had been similarly categorised. I could also differentiate the odd categories and clearly specify new categories and sub-categories. I have compared the categories across individuals to develop the sub-categories that reflected variations in how a given category was manifested across a group of individuals. These categories and sub-categories were the conceptual building blocks for the whole picture of the unit of participants in the study. The next phase of the analysis entailed creating thematic profiles of each participant unit of the school community. I used comparison across unit cases to identify clusters of the participant units with similar configurations of sub-themes. Thus, establishing comparative analysis enabled me to see patterns (Gibbs, 2007) that emerged from different units of the school community.

Although the categories and sub-categories are able to describe the major components of participants’ cultural values, they still do not lead me beyond abstract conceptualisation of cultural values formation. According to Sandelowski (1996, p. 527) “Nuances and contradictions of real life experiences” are still considered meaningless unless they are well connected. These categories and sub-categories must therefore be connected and fit together to describe their variations. Thus, I had established connections between the categories to make them completely meaningful. I had directed my focus into understanding different ranges of contextual backgrounds that surround every participant. I discerned that stories of referred clients, self-referred clients and those uninvolved in counselling contained different nuances with regard to their values formation and attitudes towards counselling. The same also applied to other units of school participants. Stories of school administrators and school teachers needed to be

understood based on their contextual backgrounds and different roles that they played in school.

Finally, after establishing a connection with categories, I began to identify a core category that represents all other categories. Known as selective coding (Gibbs, 2007), this central category ties all other categories in the theory together to form a story. It involves the process of explicating the storyline that emerges from the data. I bring an example of school counsellors' stories. There were four categories that emerged from school counsellors' stories; which include "It's blood, sweat and sometimes tears", "When two worlds collide", "Travelling a rocky road" and "It is not the end, it is just the beginning". After going through iterative scrutiny, I identified that the most appropriate and comprehensive core category that would best address my storyline is "The plight of school counsellors". It is going to be embedded in my story as a means to direct my description of school counsellors' stories (see appendix 18). As a constructivist researcher who embraces a hermeneutic stance, I am aware that my analysis will not come to an end at this point; instead it will continue to proceed into the writing stage. Please refer to figure 5.1 and table 5.2 and Appendices 14, 15 and 16 for further details of coding processes of other units within the school community.

Figure 5.1: Modified diagrammatic representation of Charmaz multi- step analysis technique based on Glaser and Strauss and Glaser (as cited in Eaves, 2001).

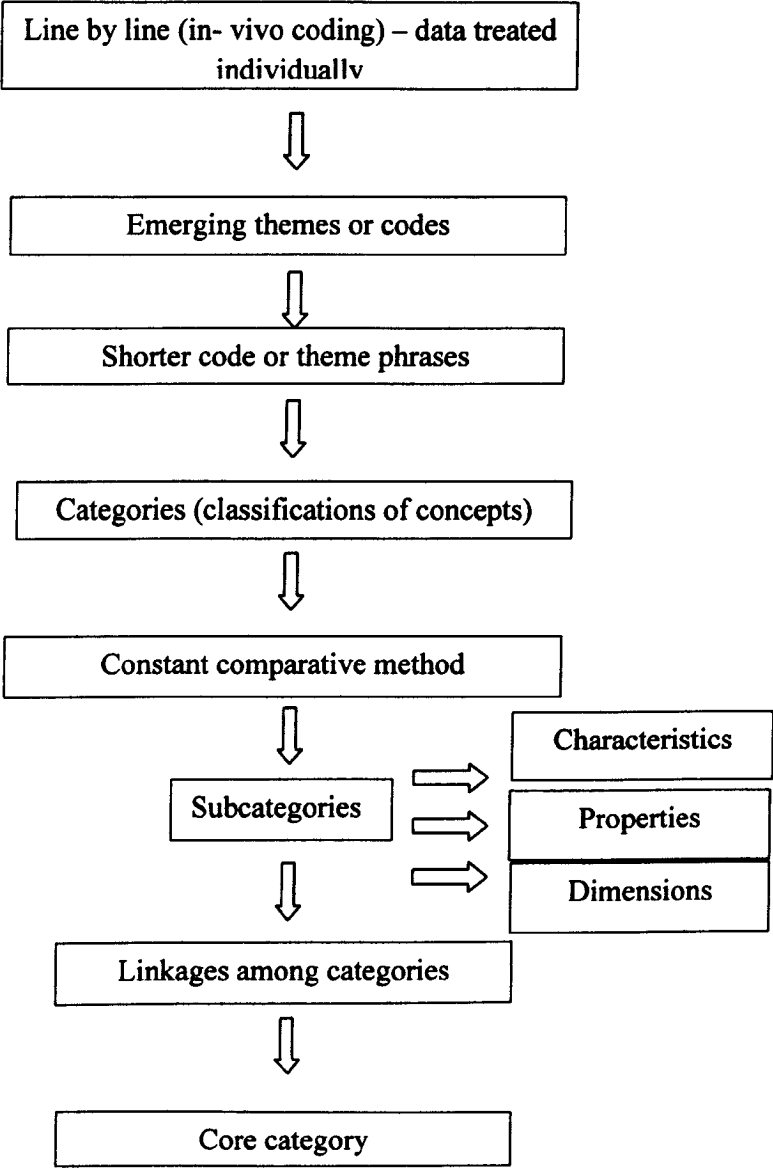


Table 5.1: *Within and across case analytical strategies for exploring students' cultural values and attitudes to counselling*

Comparison	Purpose	Strategy	Product
<p>Within individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referred clients</li> <li>• Self-referred clients</li> <li>• Uninvolved in Counselling</li> </ul>	Identify important aspects of cultural values	Close reading of individual interviews and summaries	Coding categories themes
<p>Across group of individuals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referred clients</li> <li>• Self referred clients</li> <li>• Uninvolved in Counselling</li> </ul>	Identify variation around themes	Data coding and display	Sub themes
<p>Within units of participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students</li> </ul>	Identify configurations of themes within unit of participants	Close reading of individual interviews and summaries	Additional themes based on within the students discrepancies
<p>Across units participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School counsellor</li> <li>• School administrators</li> <li>• Teachers</li> </ul>	Compare students views across units of participants	Interviews summaries	Refined students' cultural values, exemplar cases

Adapted from Ayres et al. (2003)

Since my data consisted of different units of participants within one school, I begin the discussion by describing how I analysed them one by one. I started my analysis by looking at students' data. As mentioned earlier, there were three different groups of students identified in my research. They consisted of referred clients, self-referred clients, and those not involved in counselling. As I scrutinised the data, I found data presented by referred clients were uniquely personal. Although they have described the same ingredients of their stories like family backgrounds, their personal lives, peer groups, involvement in disciplinary problems and their attitudes towards counselling, I found these turned into different stories. For this reason, I made a decision to interpret their stories as a self-contained whole. I then created profiles for each participant in this group in the form of a narrative case summary.

However, there was a different picture of analysis noted as I closely examined the stories of other groups of students. Self-referred clients and those not involved in counselling seemed to display their collective stance concerning the issue. They had stated their common views regarding their experiences. Hence I have decided to portray their voices as a collective story. I then created thematic profiles for each group of students to observe any commonalities and differences that occurred across the data. These profiles allowed me to link the thematic profile across the group into an overall student profile as well as to identify categories and sub-categories relating to how students described their values.

The same process was also applied to other entities in the school community, namely counsellors, teachers and administrators. There were seven counsellors, two teachers and five administrators in this analysis. I decided to present all of their stories, since they communicated their unique and distinctive experiences within their respective positions. The analysis was then pursued by describing their stories individually, by creating their own profiles. The profiles were then compared across individuals to identify commonalities as well as differences in the data. This stage of analysis permitted the emergence of sub-categories across the data. I decided to present their stories in a collective form as they indicated more commonalities than differences in their views. Finally, I created thematic profiles of each group as a representation of their

voices and stances in regard to the issue. This profile allows comparison across other units of school communities which participated in the study. Please refer to Appendix 8.

### **Analysing field notes**

Immersing in narrative ethnography is more meaningful if it is complemented by using field notes as another form of representation. As stated by Strater and Sunstein (as cited in Goodall, (2000), field notes convey two stories. One is about the interpretation of participants' stories, and the other depicts narrative tales of the researcher's position and the way he or she did the research. Therefore, the field notes acted as linkages that connect my fieldwork experiences and self-reflexivity. In this vein, I agree with Goodall (2000) that by employing field notes, I was not only trying to comprehend others' cultures, but also include myself as part of the story.

In analysing my field notes, I came to the suggestions given by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995, p.144) that I needed to have a fresh look by reading the whole field notes in order to analytically scrutinise what I had observed and recorded. This subsequently permitted me to identify themes, patterns and variations within the data. For this purpose, I created two columns; the first for my field notes and the second for my coding. I did apply the same procedure of using the constructivist grounded theory approach in analysing this data. It involved line by line coding which was followed by initial interpretation and finished by analytic analysis. I had also embedded theoretical memos along the coding processes as a means of interacting with the data. This kind of memo was different from the initial memo as it was considered analytical, since I had observed the entire scenario of the fieldwork. Constant comparison was also applied to compare between incidents previously seen. Finally the memos became more focused and could be linked together with other pieces of data. In the analysis, I took into account all of the resources obtained, including direct and indirect experiences in the events, for example in a counselling unit, during the programmes and activities conducted, as well as around the school compound and classrooms. I then tried to link them with my own understanding and experiences. By reflexively asking myself about

the choice of field notes that I wanted to highlight, I came to the decision to include only those significant parts that could add to the thickness of the data.

### **Translation issue**

Roulston (2010) and Nikander (2008) remind me that the process of translation is considered central to the representation of data. This is because failures to portray the accurate meaning will yield useless data and lead to misinterpretation. Therefore, in order to preserve the meaning brought by the participants who all spoke in Malay, I took the initiative to perform a direct translation of the original data by myself into the English language. It was not difficult to carry out the translation process, as the Malay language shares more or less similarity to the English language in terms of grammar rules and sentence structure. The translation began after finishing all the processes of transcribing and generating findings. Roulston (2010) further reminds me of the importance of the translation process in order to ensure that the text is comprehensible and communicable by using appropriate vocabulary and syntax. Hence, in order to minimise the translation errors such as grammatical mistakes and inaccurate meaning, the translated version was then submitted to one of my colleagues who is expert in both languages to review the overall translation. In order to produce a clear, accurate and natural translation, I took into account the contextual meaning rendered by the participants. I put them in brackets so as to inform the readers. For example, I gave literal meaning to this phrase '*mat rempit*' (the person who does an illegal act of racing motorbikes) as it is impossible to translate accurately by including the original word in the final text.

I was also aware that the translation process did not only involve the literal process of translation but also involved translating the meaning from the participants. In writing field notes, Emerson et al. (1995) remind me to always interpret and translate what I observed into text in order to present "a whole way of life for future audience who may not be familiar with the world she describes" (p.16).

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, I took the effort to engage in several formal and informal peer review procedures. During the stages of translating and determining emerging themes from the data, I usually refer to my supervisor as well as



my colleagues in Malaysia who are experienced in qualitative research for their views on the accurateness of the translations and constructed themes. Additionally, member-checks were also conducted with some of my participants especially school counsellors and administrators. In the midst of my data collection, I managed to send the preliminary report to the head of school counsellor indicating my initial analysis as well as seeking for her clarification. The same procedure was also applied during the analysis and writing stage, where I used various channels of communication such as telephone, Facebook and email to acquire additional information as well as verification on the content of participants' transcripts.

### **Data representation**

Embracing a narrative ethnography, as well as placing my research under a constructivist- interpretivist stance, enables me to situate my study under the 'Impressionist tales' and "Confessional tales" as informed by Maanen (1998). The former denotes "presenting the doing of the fieldworks" (Goodall, 2000, p. 72) using evocative language, while the latter is more personalised as it took into consideration the reflexive accounts of my identities and positions as a researcher and a counsellor educator. I considered blending these two elements as they complemented and increased my data presentation. I did not consider it appropriate to tell my stories in a "Realist mode" which would be de-personalised. Moreover, de-personalised and objective accounts would be contradictory with my concern to embrace meaning-making and knowledge construction. I considered highlighting my personal details as well as the story of the participants, as I regarded them vital for my reflexive interpretation. As stated by Goodall (2008), views of researchers are considered partisan as they come from different backgrounds with unique experiences. Furthermore, it could counter the critique of ethnography for being a coloniser that concentrates only on the effects of colonisation among colonised people (Davies, 2008). My intention is to avoid as far as possible imposing my views on my research participants.

My approach to ethnography endeavours to provide a balance towards an *evocative representation* of the fieldwork experiences (Goodall, 2000, p. 121). This means my positions and my journey of discoveries, which include interview and field notes, will be explicitly revealed in the foreground. In doing so, I only selected and interpreted

stories that were considered meaningful and significant. These would provide the main features of a picture that could move the readers towards analytical engagement. In this sense, I took into consideration the suggestion given also by Goodall (2000, p. 70) to include the element of 'dramatic conflict' between cultures as a means to develop cultural understanding and interest among readers. I provided few literary allusions (Goodall, 2010, pp. 30-37) via different genre styles, such as in the forms of analogies, simple quotations from a work of literature, and several metaphors, field notes, as well as my personal experience to frame my stories. My aim is to provide the reader with a sense of connection to the piece that follows from it as well as generated interesting moods and curiosity towards the story.

My story presentation was also not restricted to any preconceived research questions, theoretical framing or textual formula. Instead, the conflicts as well as the issues presented were embedded and interwoven in the stories. This enables the readers to wander through different stories and construct their meaning and interpretations freely. Although I have taken a similar approach of constant comparative analysis, the categories and core categories that emerged were not explicitly revealed; instead they were embedded in the storyline and acted as guidelines or central mappings that informed my stories. In addition, there were no absolute conclusions found in the final part of each chapter; instead they were embedded and understood conscientiously within the thoughts, passions and actions of the characters in each of the stories.

Indeed, the process of unpacking the meaning of the data ended with a surprise for me. I underestimated the extent to which the process of data collection and analysis had greatly shaped my understanding and awareness of the phenomena. I had not anticipated how great a disparity with my research findings from previous literature would appear. Initially, I pictured my thesis as consisting only of two stories; those of students and school counsellors. I expected to highlight only their voices as they were directly connected to the service. I anticipated that they could offer a full understanding of the key issues, and had intended to disregard voices of others within the school community as they were not directly involved in the service. However, in the midst of my journey of collecting and analysing the data, I found myself struck by the significance of those other voices. They had eventually changed my interpretation. I began to appreciate voices of others and regarded them as vital to the construction of my analysis. The

previous notions and beliefs that were strongly held in my mind about counselling services began to disappear. I am no longer attached to the same framework but moved myself valiantly into a new fresh paradigm of understanding. I can now see and feel the halo effects of my ethnographic engagement, which are set out more fully in my finding chapters.

Indeed, the journey towards making a meaningful process of each tale requires endless effort and dedication. I consider this process to be repetitious, often tedious, and time-consuming. The inculcation of wisdom and moral responsibilities is essential to put the stories in their most appropriate place. Although it is considered a painstaking experience, I regard this process as an insightful journey that has shifted my views and perceptions on the issue. I consider the role and functions of interviews and field notes to symbiotically complement each other. Both lead me towards building my identity as a researcher in the process of knowledge construction. As I engaged in these analytical processes, I came to appreciate the usefulness of incorporating the principles of constant comparative analysis as it added to the richness of the data and contributed to the full understanding of the issue that can inform the readers, particularly school counsellors and counsellor educators. I am now mostly ready to move myself towards the next chapter. I look forward to presenting the stories, and eagerly invite all the readers to sail together with me in this wonderful experience.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **STUDENTS' STORIES**

#### **Differentiation of students' involvement in guidance and counselling services**

##### **Introduction**

This chapter presents my first of four different narratives explored in the school community. This is the story of students who participated in my research. They were identified as referred clients, self-referred clients and those not involved in counselling service. They provided me with their own diverse realities; as school students, daughters or sons to their families, and most importantly as units in a school community. In this chapter, I would like to invite readers to explore my students' experiences, and also to understand their worldviews and nuances in their own cultural milieus.

##### **Referred clients' stories**

###### **"Finally, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel"**

**Aziz**

Little did I realise that my initial conversation with one Malay boy on my first day in this school had coincidentally opened up a new hope for finding a potential participant. I still remember vividly on that day, I sought the boy's permission and invited him to sit with me. I will call him Aziz. At first I did feel a bit doubtful of his willingness to be interviewed. He proved me wrong. As promised, on the following day he turned up at a counselling room on time after the school recess at 10.30 a.m. I was amazed by the way he spoke and treated me. He was a soft-spoken and polite boy. I saw him as a typical schoolboy in his school uniform of white shirt and dark blue trousers. He had the dark complexion of a typical Malay boy. The things that made him distinct from others were that he spoke with a slight stutter, and had a scrawny body. I tried to make our conversation as informal as possible, and did my best to ensure that my presence made

him comfortable and not intimidated. I was also aware that I should not pressurise him with any pretentious questions in this formal encounter. As a newcomer in this school, I clearly introduced myself as a researcher. I knew I had taken a risk to open up and be honest about my actual role and position at the very beginning of our encounter. At the same time, I tried to bridge our role differentials by playing down my expertise. Indeed I reiterated to him my intention to learn something from him in order for me to perform my duty as a successful counsellor educator. I was so glad that he accepted the way I presented myself. Again, I sought permission from him to be my participant. He seemed not to be intimidated by the informed consent form, as he willingly signed it without much ado.

I let the conversation flow naturally around his life as a student. I tried to encourage him to speak more by asking questions around his interests. He did mention during our first informal conversation that he worked after school as a hawker selling different kinds of soft drinks. He chose to work in different night markets around the district, and worked from four o'clock in the afternoon until midnight every day. He could obtain around RM20 – RM30 (£4 - £6) per day for doing the job. In a month, he could get around RM900. Although he appeared a bit sleepy during the conversation, he still showed interest in telling me more about his background. Deep inside, I could not imagine how this boy became involved in a part-time job at this early age. Admittedly, there was a wide disparity between the two of us when I reflected my life as a secondary school pupil in the early 1990s. During my time, I had never experienced dual roles; hence I led an ordinary life as a student. My only task was to study and try my best to excel in my subjects. I realised I did not face any hardship or bitterness in my younger days. Indeed, I was grateful to have a family who encouraged me to strive harder in my studies. They inculcated in me the values of education. According to them, education could take me anywhere. Hence, I devoted my life to achieving the best that I could in education.

Aged 16 years old, Aziz was the fifth of six siblings. He stayed with his elder brother and sister-in-law, as his parents both worked as cooks in a restaurant far away in another region. He could only meet them once every two months. He confessed that his friends were the main motivation for him, since he was far away from his parents.

When I asked him to describe himself, I noticed that he kept on repeating that he was a bad boy. He deliberately illustrated himself as a troublemaker, and seemed to be one. I wondered what made him admit to these words. I listened attentively to what he had to say.

*I have always been naughty, since I was seven years old. I started smoking when I was in form one (13 years old). During my secondary school, I befriended bad boys. They offered me drugs and I became addicted. They taught me and asked me to join them in a robbery, which turned me into a robber. I remember that I used to meet them at McDonalds either to hang out or plan for a robbery. I could not recall the number of times that I participated in a robbery. There was a time that I was nearly caught by the police. Fortunately, I managed to escape. When my friends discussed their plans to get more money, I became excited. I did not think of anything else except to enjoy myself. Purely for fun, I just followed them. The money that I obtained from robbery was really amazing! If it was a group robbery, we could obtain up to RM20,000. If I did it alone, I could get around RM400 – RM3000. Last month, we managed to get the biggest catch; the money amounted to RM250,000 in total (£50,000). We have decided not to divide the money yet to protect our safety. We knew that the police would be able to trace us from the serial number of the cash notes if we spend them. As a precaution, we just keep them.*

I felt myself shiver listening to Aziz's confession of his drug and robbery activities. I was staring at him in disbelief. I was stunned that a 16-year-old boy could explain his criminal activities so openly and without remorse. My astonishment was heightened upon hearing of his involvement in a big robbery. Frankly, I did not know what had made him open up the issue, as if he was not frightened of getting caught. I could feel he was adamant and determined to share about his life with me, although I only wished he could channel these feelings in a better direction. At the same time, I felt honoured that he had wanted to share his darker side. He seemed to put great trust in me. It was probably because of our transparent research relationship (Gale, 1992; Gilbert, 2001) that emphasised sincere collaborations (Etherington, 2009) that had enabled him to disclose his story. I neither reacted angrily nor threw my initial judgement towards him,

although deep inside, I was trembling with disbelief. I also felt that as he began to open up, his confidence to speak had also increased. This enabled me to probe into his stories further.

Apart from robbery, Aziz was also involved in street-fighting. He identified that his actions were stimulated by his cravings for enjoyment and money, and for the sake of friendship.

*Stealing and robbing was not only for fun, but for revenge and helping my friends. I fought just to help my friends get their things back. As a reward for my successful job, I managed to own things like mobile phones or money that were confiscated from the victims. I am skilful in using the samurai sword, Rambo knife and all sorts of knives. As far as I can remember, I have beaten many people and there were also some cases of death. These people usually were older than me, around 20 – 30 years old.*

He then recalled how he felt, and what motivated him to take drugs.

*When I took drugs, I felt calm and did not experience any stress at all. I took drugs when I felt lethargic after getting back from work. I began taking drugs when I was in form two (14 years old). It was just to have peace of mind and to relax. I also took it for fighting. Being influenced by drugs, I felt like the strongest person when I fought. I showed no mercy to the victims and did not feel any pain when they beat me.*

I was baffled by the words uttered from his mouth. I never expected to be sitting in front of a schoolboy who portrayed himself in two different characters. Through my own eyes, I saw him merely as a typical schoolboy, not as the criminal he had turned out to become. For a while at that time, I imagined myself sitting at a juvenile detention centre, speaking with a young offender. I had quickly brought myself back to reality as I needed to remind myself that this student was telling me about issues faced by school students today. When I reflected on my experiences observing counsellor trainees during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most of the cases among secondary school pupils revolved around psychosocial and interpersonal problems. It was considered common among secondary school students at that time to present problems such as

love, learning and relationship difficulties. Admittedly, I occasionally encountered more challenging cases like incest and sexual abuse. I could remember vividly that most of the counsellor trainees managed to handle these problems successfully, as they were very well prepared to face these issues. Now, I was encountering a bizarre issue and I suspected there could be many other students with similar problems.

From his story, I sensed that Aziz was angry. He symbolised himself as having a dragon character. He wanted revenge against one person who always provoked him.

*I swear to myself, I will keep hunting him until I die.*

*I would feel satisfied if he finally died lying on the ground. Even if he was admitted to the hospital, surely I would keep finding him.*

I could see the anger burning in his eyes. I felt nervousness and fear creeping on me upon hearing his words. I realised that I was not dealing with an ordinary boy. I was faced with a boy who might put me in jeopardy. I could feel my heart tremble. I was put in a dilemma. Should I bring this matter to the authorities, or stay silent about this? I was completely dumbfounded, but I realised that I should allow him a chance to continue sharing his life story with me.

I wanted to explore Aziz's values as a student. I discovered that due to his notorious lifestyle, Aziz had shunned his studies and alienated himself from the school environment. I slowly began to understand and view the landscape of his life. His days revolved around his work and friends. They were regarded as the utmost important source of survival for him. Neither family nor school sustained him.

*During form one and form two, I started to get less interested in studying. I was always thinking of ways to enjoy myself.*

*...I usually hang out with my friends until 4 o'clock in the morning after I finish my work at the night market. The next morning, if I manage to get up at 7 am I will go to school. I only slept for two to three hours. When I feel sleepy, I will be absent from school. There were times when I was absent for one whole month and was warned by my class teacher. My parents did not know about it, my brother also did not bother, so why should I care?*



His story left me bewildered. What made him think that way? Why did he feel so alienated and disengaged? Was it only he who felt alienated and disengaged (Dei, Mazzuca, McIssac & Zine, 2007) from the school environment? Why could he not see the importance of education in his life? It seemed that his friends and part-time work were more important to him. He sacrificed everything for his friends. He seemed to enjoy the excitement with friends and the job that he was involved in more.

I was then astounded listening to his experience as a student in school.

*I don't understand what the hell the teacher is teaching us. Every time we are asked to copy all the things written on the whiteboard without him / her trying to explain to us... so why the heck should I be sitting in the classroom doing things that I don't understand at all?*

I could sense that he was disengaged from learning. He did not seem to regard the value of education as he could not relate to the lessons taught. It was difficult for him to understand the subject matter as he felt that the teacher did not teach the subject and the students appropriately.

I started to ask myself a few questions. What were the functions of the school community and guidance and counselling services in this school? Were they failing to involve students in school life? I decided to probe more from Aziz before I reached any conclusions. It was obvious that there were still many things that I needed to explore.

I explored Aziz's attitude towards classroom and other school programmes, especially the guidance and counselling programmes.

*Well, before this, I perceived counselling as a place for playing truant. Many students come here for the sake of loafing and wasting their time. When I first came here, I didn't know the actual role of counselling. I just wasted my time by hanging around with my friends.*

From our conversation, I came to realise that counselling was perceived as valueless. He seemed clueless about the importance of the service, let alone appreciating the role of the school counsellors. He regarded the counselling unit as merely a place for students to escape from classes. It was just a place for having fun, and sharing jokes and banter with fellow friends. I sensed that there was a misconception about the role of guidance and counselling services rendered to him. He could not comprehend the benefits offered by the service. I kept wondering why this was happening. Was it his ignorance towards school and the counselling services that led him to behave this way?

I then tried to explore his experiences dealing with the service. Without hesitation, he described the story of his first experience with the service. According to him, his class teacher first referred him to the service due to his absenteeism from school. He was required to attend a session. At that time, he wondered what counselling could do to help him. Why should he go there since he viewed it as a place for just having fun? He did not believe in counselling, let alone the counsellors.

However, after being referred to the session more than three times, he appeared to realise its purpose. Counselling was not actually for fun. The counsellors were more than willing to help him. They were sincere in offering their help. He began to have a renewed perception about counselling. He felt appreciated as he realised there were people who cared about him. He began to notice that there were other people, other than his friends, who were willing to ease the void within him; the counsellors who cared, who would listen and assist him to solve his problems.

*I first met Madam Rose, and she is so kind and has a great sense of humour.*

The more I probed, the more I began to sense his connectedness with counselling. I could sense his appreciative sense towards the value of counselling and its strength to help him change. He started to gain insights after various meetings with the counsellors, especially so with the newly appointed male counsellor. I could feel he was genuinely grateful when he regarded the counsellors as the ones who managed to guide him. Above all, he was deeply touched by the empathy and kindness the counsellors had shown to him.

*They are really helpful and supportive. Their pleasant words put me at ease. When I had a session with them, I felt a peace of mind. From then, I have started to change a lot. I stopped taking drugs, was less absent from class and abstained from stealing. Before this, every time after school, I would get myself into fights. I was so mean to everyone. But now, NO!*

As I interviewed him, I sensed that I was not only conducting an interview, but also carried myself as a counsellor who was trying to probe, co-construct and understand the root of his problems. I felt responsible for helping him, as I knew deep inside that he wanted to make changes in himself. I began to explore his sense towards self and religion. Although he was born as a Muslim, I discovered that he had disengaged himself from the religion. He admitted;

*... honestly, as a Muslim, I never performed any prayers ever since I was in primary school. I have no spirit and courage to perform it. Moreover, my friends always keep asking me to go out and hang around. Most of them do not pray either.*

I could see the dominant influence his friends have on his lifestyle. It was not a great shock for me to discover that his devotion towards his friends was far greater than his obligation towards his religion. He simply neglected to perform his prayers, which is one of the Islamic pillars, and is obligatory for all Muslims who reach puberty, except for those who are mad or mentally deficient, as prescribed by the Quran and Sunna. When I reflected on my own childhood experiences, admittedly our upbringing was very different. I could remember that my siblings and I were trained by my father to pray five times daily from the age of seven. As head of the family, my father reminded us about the importance of praying and the punishment that awaits us in the hereafter for those who neglect the callings of the Almighty. Nonetheless, I tried to be empathic with Aziz's contextual situation; mortal, lost and drifting in a sea of nowhere with no one ashore to show him the right path.

I could see the therapeutic effects (Gilbert, 2001) of our conversation had helped him to relate his life story with events that had happened (Etherington, 2009). He began to see the picture of his life as a whole, rather than perceiving it as separate and disjointed pieces. Most importantly, his life story had helped him to make sense of the meaning of his life (McLean, 2005). From the constructed story, Aziz began to realise his real self in his new environment. After having three interview sessions with him, I could see the changes in him. He regretted his wrongdoings, and admitted having sleepless nights pondering his behaviour.

*I want to repent. At this point, I tried to stop myself from being involved in those harmful things. I have been thinking so many times that I do not want that money. At first I felt happy if I could bring the money home. However, when I think of it many times, I am certain that I do not want them anymore. I am afraid I will get more punishment from God; and worse, what if suddenly I died without being able to repent.*

I listened attentively to what he was saying. Deep inside I felt proud that he was beginning to think about changing for the better. For the very first time since listening to his story, I could grasp that he was focusing on himself. He could detach himself from his friend's bad influences and was able to constructively appreciate himself by slowly loosening from his friends' grip. Above all, he tried to move on towards a better life.

When I asked him about his experiences of being involved in this interview, he said:

*I feel proud because I have been selected to participate in your study. It is not easy for you to get the information, and I really hope that counselling could help me change myself.*

*...I feel like I have changed a bit.... Now, I have started to attend religious classes, which I had ignored before. I know how to pray, but I still have problems reciting the verses. I would like to start performing my daily prayer this year as I realised that I have committed lots of sin.*

Deep inside, I could feel his determination to change and start with a new beginning. He was hoping that the counsellors could continuously guide him to the right path. I could feel the shift in his identity throughout this co-construction process. He could withdraw himself from excessively clinging to his friends to become a more responsible person, and differentiate the real meaning of having true friends. Most importantly, he understood more about himself and his actual needs in life. Above all, he did not regret losing his friends.

As a researcher, I admitted that I was not merely conducting a research. More importantly, providing him guidance was part of my responsibility because I consider that all human beings should be respected, irrespective of any wrongdoings that they have committed. Indeed, I considered meeting Aziz to be a good start for me to understand students' values on school, as well as the school's counselling environment. At the end of this interview, I felt privileged that Aziz was willing to share so much about his experiences. I had no means of affirming all that he had disclosed, particularly about the crimes. I think that he had committed to be more honest and open with me because he saw me as neither a school counsellor nor a teacher with strict obligations to the school. Regardless whether all the details that he has disclosed were true, he has provided a lot of insights into the counselling services the school has provided to young people in real difficulties. I was aware that by playing dual roles, as a researcher and a counsellor, this enabled me to help Aziz explore his inner self and realise the injustice he was doing to himself. Additionally, embracing self-reflexivity and renegotiating the expectations of ethical stances (Adams, 2008, p.188; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Ellis, 2007) had also enabled me to probe into his life-story. This is parallel with Smythe and Murray (2000, p. 334) who stated that "ethical issues in narrative research are best rendered in shade of gray rather than in black and white. On this basis, I was able to respect his confidentiality. My ethical dilemma would have been much more serious had he not chosen to use our working together as a way of extricating himself from serious misconduct. Listening to Aziz's story made me more motivated to explore the perceptions of students towards the service. I was interested to listen to voices of other students as well. This brought me to invite Govindasamy as my next participant.

**“I think I found my way home!!”**

**Govindasamy**

*It was a cool dewy morning when I arrived at the school. I could smell the freshly cut grass blending in the morning breeze, which calmed me. I realised I was going to spend several weeks in this school and I was going to have the imprint of my shoes on that grass. I realised how much more sensitive I was to my surroundings. As soon as I reached the counselling unit, I saw two boys; a Malay and an Indian sitting next to each other on a red jacquards sofa. I recognised their faces. It was Aziz, the participant whom I had interviewed previously. I was wondering why he was here again, as I had already finished my interview session with him in the previous week. I let my curiosity pass. I turned my attention to the other figure beside Aziz; the Indian boy. I could also remember him as he always comes to see Mr Siva during recess time. This boy was dressed smartly in his school uniform. His neatly combed hair appeared as a distinctive feature to me, as though he had used a kind of hairspray to keep his hair intact. When Aziz saw me, he immediately stood up and introduced Govindasamy to me. He was Aziz's classmate, and another potential participant in my study. Indeed, I was deeply touched by Aziz's willingness to help me in finding a potential participant for this study. It brought a smile to my face.*

*Field notes: 22 July 2009*

I was blessed to have the opportunity to meet Govindasamy, who was also a referred client. Although I managed to conduct several individual interviews and casual conversations with other referred clients, his story turned out to be unique and distinctive as he offered me insights into understanding more about the counselling services, specifically the merit-demerit systems prescribed by the school's rules and regulations.

Like Aziz, this student had been previously referred by his class teacher for counselling, as his demerit points for poor conduct had reached the 120-point limit. He had accumulated these demerit points as a result of various behavioural problems, particularly

playing truant and misbehaving in class. I learnt that this school had been implementing the concept of the merit-demerit system as a way to strengthen discipline among students. As I scrutinised the school's rules and regulations document, there were six procedures to be acted upon based on the merit- demerit system. This is how it works. Firstly, a student who reaches 50 demerit points will be given his or her first written warning, which is recorded in a special demerit file. The second written warning will be incurred when the points reach 80, at which point the students' parents will be notified. In addition, the students are required to sign an agreement letter to abide by the school's rules and regulations. The third action involves suspension from school for one week for students who reach 100 demerit points. Similarly, two weeks of suspension from school will be implemented when students hit 150 points. Based on the stated rules, I came to understand that counsellors would be involved at every stage of disciplinary action taken. At the end of the suspension periods, counsellors will be involved in helping students understand and realise the impact of their bad behaviour, and at the same time assist them to be better students. Lastly, the final action of the demerit system will be imposed on students who accumulate 200 demerit points. This is considered as the ultimate action taken where students will be expelled from school (see appendix 24 for school's merit and demerit systems).

Before attempting to formally interview Govindasamy, I firstly sought his consent to participate. I explained to him the purpose of interviewing, and discovered that he had already understood this through a short briefing by Aziz, prior to the meeting. I was grateful for Aziz's kindness in making the interview process so much easier for me.

Govindasamy had openly stated that he had been suspended from school for about one week, due to his involvement in a fight. He was caught quarrelling with another boy because of a love triangle. In addition to fighting, he had committed other disciplinary offences such as truancy. Govindasamy admitted using a mobile phone in the classroom and failing to display his school badge. As a 17-year old boy, he revealed that he did not like to be in his classroom as he had no friends to talk to and mingle with, because most of his classmates were Chinese and therefore lacked any sense of belonging in it. He loved to hang around with his friends, especially during the final period of school. As a result of his loneliness in the classroom, he simply skipped the last two hours of lessons just to get together with his friends who happened to be in the afternoon session.

Frankly, he explained;

*The rest of the students in my class are Chinese, and I cannot attach to them much. Only three of us in my class are Indian. One of them has been suspended while another one always skips school. So for most of the time, I always end up alone. Last time, I went out of the classroom and met a few friends, including seniors from the upper six classes. I have only one friend in this morning session. The rest of my friends are in the afternoon session. When my friends in the afternoon session came, I took the opportunity to meet them. I could not wait to catch up stories with them.*

Based on his stories, I sensed that he was not only alienated by the situation in his classroom, but also by the way he was treated by the school. Like Aziz, Govindasamy also considered friends as essential in his life. He could not see the importance of learning in school, as he did not want to miss out on having fun with his friends.

I started reflecting on the other referred clients. I found most of them had shown similar characteristics. Raju and Ah Leong, for example, displayed negative attitudes to counselling, but also no interest in their learning. Although Raju came to school every day, there was no passion for education inside him. He had no interest at all in concentrating on what was taught. In fact, he did not bother to join any school clubs as he saw a more enjoyable life outside the school. Raju has a part time job and he admitted having insufficient sleep every day.

*I don't bother about my study at all.*

*I always sleep in the classroom.*

*I don't care about my lesson at all.*

*I don't like studying ever since I was in primary school.*

*I spend the rest of my time in classroom sleeping.*

*I did not bother having my lunch for the sake of sleeping. I slept from the first morning lesson until the last teaching period of the day.*



In contrast, Ah Leong, a Chinese boy, displayed a slightly different pattern in his attitude, in comparison to Aziz, Govindasamy and Raju. He was caught spending too much time in the school's toilet and nobody knew what he was up to. Ah Leong is a loner and did his activities in solitude. He did not bother about the need for friends. When I interviewed him, he seemed reluctant to speak. In fact, he was sarcastic and rude in front of me.

Through Govindasamy's story, it revealed that he came from a family of lower socio-economic status. His father worked as a lorry driver, while his mother worked as a factory worker. He was the sixth of eight siblings. Although he spent most of his time staying with his uncle, he described himself as having a close relationship with his family members. He stayed with his uncle most of the time, except on weekends. Through our conversation, I saw him as any ordinary schoolboy. He respected and looked up to his uncle, and would love to be like him - a postman delivering letters from house to house. He has a dream to be successful, having a career of his own, although deep down he knew that he was not academically inclined.

I could see that he was aware of aspects of his actual self. He admitted he has a bad attitude, liking disturbing others and, even worse, getting involved in fights.

*What I can say about my personality is I'm a naughty boy. I always like to disturb my friends. Last time I was involved in fighting.*

Govindasamy was just like Aziz, Raju, Ah Leong and probably many other referred students in this school, who appeared to view counselling as peripheral in their lives. Counselling was only meant for those in trouble. Counselling also meant punishment. He was not only deeply worried about the idea of being interrogated by the counsellors, but also having to bear suspicious looks from other students. He was also afraid of his father's reaction. He expected that his father would be furious if he was expelled from school. As a result, he felt anxious and nervous coming to the counselling unit. Indeed he was not alone in this. His friends were also apprehensive whenever they received a letter from the counselling unit, as they were afraid of its negative consequences. Counselling, according to Govindasamy, was about punishment that was followed by suspension from school.

*I was so scared at that time when my teacher asked me to see Mr Siva. At that time I was so anxious. I asked why they had asked me to come here. My father would be angry if they expelled me from school.*

*...//. When we received the letter telling us to go to the counselling unit, my friends started to get anxious. They started to think about all the negative consequences, like getting suspended or expelled from school.*

I began to comprehend the impact of counselling on these students' perceptions. There were no expectations of positive experiences linked to the counselling services, only the idea of receiving punishment. The stigma was quite burdensome to them. It seemed to haunt students, and thus could subsequently impede the counselling process. Ironically, although Govindasamy admitted to be a troublemaker who deserved punishment, he could not fully accept himself as deserving counselling.

However, Govindasamy shared with me that after participating in a few counselling sessions, he was surprised to be given a totally different experience from what he had anticipated. The negative image of counselling gradually diminished. He found that counsellors were not only helpful but also gave him the much-needed attention and guidance which had completely touched him. I could feel the sincerity in his words, although at first I felt sceptical of his increasingly positive opinion about school counsellors. I felt that he just wanted to grab my attention and was probably trying to impress and please me with his kind words. Throughout the conversation, he proved me wrong. I could observe the honesty in his words and actions. In fact, he shyly admitted that I was not the only person who noticed these changes. He reported that his teacher was also delighted as she acknowledged the changes in his behaviour and appearance.

*My class teacher, Madam Mary, also expressed her surprise to see my changes. She even asked why I have changed so much and have tucked my shirt in. Honestly, I had been wearing a scruffy uniform since I was in form one. Other students also did the same thing. Students liked to wear untucked shirts, as it is considered a trend here, despite it being against the school's rules and regulations.*

*When I came here (to the counselling unit), I was so surprised to hear that I wasn't going to be suspended. In fact Mr Siva said he could help me to reduce my demerit points. I couldn't even imagine it could be happening to me. So yesterday I managed to hand in my homework to Mr Siva.*

*Mr Siva had asked me to do the homework, not to play truant anymore, and always tuck the shirt in my trousers. He will observe me for three weeks. I have two more weeks under his observation. Indeed, Mr Siva is like a father who endlessly gives advice.*

I was amazed by the way he praised his counsellor repeatedly. He seemed grateful to have Mr Siva as his counsellor. At first I thought it could be because he would like to impress his counsellor who was the same race as him, but I realised I was wrong. Govindasamy admitted that all counsellors were helpful and he regarded them as part of his extended family. They cared about him and other students like him. He was deeply touched by their dedication, commitment and attention, portrayed by their emphatic relational bonds (Westra, 2004). In his experience, during the counselling sessions, he could feel the sincerity being offered by them. I found it hard to believe that I was listening to such a positive view of counselling. Govindasamy spoke straight from his heart about counselling and the counsellors in that school. He had impressed me even more when he showed the courage to share his counselling experience with his fellow friends. It was quite rare for me to hear such a thing. He felt compelled to share the benefits of the counselling process, as he was convinced by his own direct experiences.

*I learnt a lot in that one week I was suspended from school. I had nowhere to go and did nothing at home except face my father who was really angry at me. I really regret doing this stupid thing. I missed my classes for a week. It really, really hurts.*

*...I see counselling as a helping relationship. I regarded Mr Siva as a father who is always advising not to play truant. Right now I have done all my homework. Everything turns out to be good ...Counsellors can help us to reduce our demerit points as well as helping us to overcome disciplinary problems.*

I could grasp that he had started to see the relevance of counselling. He was convinced by the idea of having counsellors to guide him. Above all, he could see the value of counselling in his life. He admitted that:

*I don't want to get involved in those activities any more. Now I am a good boy. I do all my homework. I do not play truant anymore.*

*All my Chinese friends have begun coming here too. I found they have no problem at all coming here. Students can come here because the counsellors are nice and very helpful. They are all like family.*

*...I have also convinced them that counselling is not only meant for those in trouble, but for all. We can come here any time we like. Now, all my friends have started to come here to see Mr Siva. I have tucked my shirt in, so do all my friends.*

*Now, there are no more problems with me. All my teachers have expressed their disbelief at seeing the change in my behaviour. They said, now I am a good boy. Indeed Mr Siva has given lots of advice.*

I could feel that he wanted to change to a new life. I could sense his identity construction and reconstruction (Etherington, 2009) throughout our conversation. He was this spirited schoolboy who was ready to embrace the enjoyment of school life and explore his potential as a student. He felt attached to the counsellors as well as to the school. He was fully motivated and beginning to take charge of his personal agency (Angus and Kagan, 2007). He has developed an attachment to the counsellors and feels more connected to the school. There was no turning back for him. He has found his way back home.

## **“Finding hope, gaining insights”**

### **Aisya**

*It was very difficult for me to find any female referred clients who would be willing to share their stories with me. When I reflected on students' responses for interview sessions, I found the cooperation mainly from those male and female clients who were referred and self-referred respectively. I guess female referred students feel more stigmatised with counselling. Since counselling in this school was linked to punishment, they anticipate receiving negative stigma and labelling from fellow friends. If I were them, I would also think not once or twice, but a thousand times before turning up and sharing my stories. Hence, I was not surprised to receive a series of rejections from them. They simply ignored the letter and did not turn up for any meetings.*

*Field notes: 4 August 2009*

Meeting Aisya was a pleasant experience for me. I was so relieved that she was willing to share her stories with me. I knew it was more difficult for female students to exchange their experiences with an outsider like me as compared to their male counterparts.

Aisya was chosen from a list of female referred clients given to me by the school counsellors. Indeed, I regarded meeting Aisya as a major breakthrough after facing a series of frustrations of not getting female referred clients. I was overjoyed when she agreed to speak with me. She came to meet me voluntarily, one afternoon.

Aisya is a Malay, Muslim girl. I perceived her as a happy-go-lucky student. She was always smiling; in fact, she has a sweet smile. It was easy to persuade her to talk, as she was friendly and talkative. Aisya probably has many good friends, as she seemed a warm and friendly girl. In addition, she portrayed herself as having being firm. She knew and meant what she said. Although she was only 15 years old at that time, she was not afraid to speak her mind. I became so engrossed in our conversation that I had not noticed time had passed by so quickly. Aisya truly captivated me by her stories.

From her story, I learned that Aisya was accused of being involved in a fight. However, she claimed she was innocent, citing that she was actually protecting her friend in the incident. My earlier intuition about her was right. As an outgoing girl, I supposed she had many friends. So, I was not surprised to notice that she would do anything in the name of friendship. That incident had brought her to her first experience with counselling.

When I asked her to describe her first experience of being in a counselling room, she admitted having no idea what counselling is all about. Aisya had looked at me blankly, and her body language suggested that she was quite uncomfortable to be asked that question. She confessed *I did feel anxious when I first came here.*

Her short response left me wondering what had made her feel that way. Her answer led me to reflect on the stories told by the other students interviewed previously. They had given similar opinions. The difference was that Aisya's interpretations on the role of counsellors were more severe. She had perceived them as being fierce and abusive. Her opinion was based on her discussions with a few friends. She mentioned that her friends also felt the same way. She explained, in earnest,

*At first I thought counselling was exclusively for students in serious trouble. I was wondering what counsellors could do to help students. Did they abuse them? I have encountered one occasion in which my friends have asked me about the same thing.*

Surrounded by many good friends, Aisya admitted that most of her friends considered counselling as exclusively for one group of students only.

*Frankly, they only regard counselling as being for troublesome students.*

Her sense of disappointment was clearly noticed in the tone of her voice when she described her impression on the context in which counselling was provided. She reported seeing only problematic students going into and out of the unit. The worst thing was that she heard the negative comments about counselling from other students too. According to Aisya, there was no indication that brilliant students would come and seek help

*... most of the time I saw only troublesome students coming here, not the brilliant ones. They even asked me why the heck I was there. It is better to stay in the classroom rather than loafing here. Counselling is just mere chatting, not more than that.*

I was intrigued with her accounts of the students' perceptions of school counsellors.

*As soon as I finished seeing the counsellor, they came and asked me what had happened. They asked me "Did they beat you or scold you?" I told them what they had perceived was wrong. I told them that we could obtain lots of advice, encouragement and so on from counsellors.*

I was quite surprised to discover students perceive counsellors as having these punitive characteristics. In the five years that I have been carrying out observations in counselling, I had never encountered such opinions from students. What had made them think that way? Was their perception a reality or was it clouded by negative expectations of counsellors?

I was greatly relieved to hear that, through experience, her views on the school counsellors had changed.

*After going through counselling with one of the counsellors, I realised that they are not that fierce."*

*.. //..I felt at ease as the counsellors were very friendly and laid-back. I first met Madam Rohaya and she was really kind and friendly. Now I have Mr Siva as my counsellor.*

When I asked her about students' values and attitudes to school, she reported that:

*Chinese students do not like to participate in any activities. There are two types of Chinese students; one group are considered as beauty-conscious. They will not join any physical activities. They just sit down, browsing entertainment magazines and exchanging ideas about their favourite artists. The other type is extremely active. They prefer to be in school fields all day long rather than spending their time in the classroom.*

*They don't like to share their problems with others. If they got involved themselves in a fight, they would prefer to settle it themselves. They don't want to share their problems with teachers. They don't really want to be helped and do not want to seek help. In other words, they love to keep things to themselves and within their group.*

Listening to the various students' stories, regardless of whether they were Malay, Chinese or Indian, the great challenges faced by school counsellors became increasingly clear to me. Suffice to say that understanding and dealing with teenagers with multiple individual and group identities is not an easy feat.

Aisya had expressed her disappointment that the guidance and counselling services in the school were not widely accessible to all students, particularly to the high-achievers. She suggested that counsellors also need to approach this group of students to convince them that counsellors too play a role towards their self-development. Aisya was certain that there must be avenues for the counsellors to render their services to this group.

*If I were a counsellor, I would take the initiative to attract the attention of excellent students to come here and have a better understanding of the role of counselling. In that sense counsellors need to engage and make an effort to understand their characteristics, including how to deal with them. There must be different approaches in how to deal with excellent, as well as with troublesome, students*

I considered the remark made by Aisya as an honest observation from a 15-year-old girl. She could see the disparity in the counselling system of this school. I mulled over the remarks made by Aisya and I was intrigued. What went wrong? Were counsellors too distant from students? Were there barriers between them that hindered the students to see how counselling works in this school? Were counsellors too blind to comprehend students' characteristics? Were they considered incompetent enough to reach and deal with different types of students? These questions led me to obtain more views and stories from other groups of students. I needed to be open-minded to obtain views from different groups of students. This brought me to seek the stories of those not involved in counselling services.



## **Stories of those not involved in counselling**

### **“They are not meant for us”**

#### **Group of female Chinese students**

*It has been 25 days since I arrived here; yet, I did not have the opportunity to establish any contact with those who not already involved in counselling. I tried many times to approach them by making myself visible around the school compound and reaching out to them during their recess time or during their transition periods in the afternoon session. I could feel that they were distancing themselves from me as they hesitated over whether to get any closer to me. I knew some of them, especially Chinese, had difficulties in conversing fluently in the Malay language. Furthermore, my appearance as an outsider increased their hesitation. Nevertheless I would not ever give up. I needed to work harder to find them. I need to be proactive in trying out various strategies to obtain their participation.*

*Field notes: 13 August 2009*

That was the second week of August 2009, which vividly illustrated my inner thoughts as recorded in my field notes. I was at the middle stage of my fieldwork where I encountered a series of frustrations in approaching students who were not involved voluntarily in any aspect of counselling; either counselling sessions or optional programmes conducted by the counsellors. Indeed, I tried my level best to approach different types of students by making myself visible around the school compound. When I reflected my experiences with students, I found that I could mingle in very well with Indian and Malay as they could openly communicate and talk to me. However, it was a bit difficult for me to establish my relationship with Chinese students as they rarely came into the unit. I could only see them at the school canteen mingling with their friends in the same racial groups, or in their classrooms having their lessons.

One fine morning, as usual I had begun preparing my notes to start my day. I was observing the unit from my working area that was situated at the left-hand corner of the reception in the counselling unit's hall. I noticed that day was hectic for all counsellors.

I observed three of them who were busy preparing a motivational programme for form three students (15 years old) who would be sitting their major examinations that year. As organisers of the programme, they needed to prepare the venue and arrange the speakers. I was aware that I should not disturb their work, and hence tried to make an effort to find participants on my own. Luckily on that day, a Malay girl came into the room to find one counsellor. I noticed she was a school prefect, as she wore the blue top and dark blue sarong of a school uniform. Surely this was a great opportunity for me to act. I quickly asked her if she could help me in finding any students, including those who had never been involved in any counselling session or programme. Without much hesitation, she promised to bring her Chinese classmates. I thought that would be a fine way to start my contact with this elusive group. Without much ado, I gave her one permission letter that was previously signed by the counsellor as permission from the class teacher to obtain students' participation.

A few hours later, I was astounded to notice that there was one group of students, consisting of eight Chinese girls, coming into the unit immediately after the recess period. I sensed their fear, as they appeared to have chosen not to come here alone. At the same time I appreciated their willingness to participate in this research. As usual, before I started the interview session, I briefed them about the ethical issues such as confidentiality and anonymity, as well as their option to withdraw from the interview at any time. I communicated to them my willingness to have group interviews as a means to offer them a safer environment where they can share experiences, ideas and beliefs in the company of people of their choice. I was relieved that they willingly agreed to participate.

As a researcher, I admitted that I had mixed feelings. I was excited and relieved. At the same time I was quite anxious. How would they perceive me? Did they feel obliged to share their thoughts? Then, these feelings of anxiety slowly evaporated as I saw their bubbly and happy faces. I felt welcomed. As usual, during the initial stage of the conversation, I established rapport with them by getting to know their personal backgrounds. Funny to think, most of them had given their nice and short nicknames, so that I could remember them easily. They were known as Bobo, Yuyu, Lilo, Lai, Feng, Jess, Tiz and May. All of them were 17 years old and considered excellent students, as they came from the highest rank of the form four class. I tried to break the ice by firstly

exploring more about their hobbies and interests. Surprisingly, they displayed active responses by sharing stories of enjoyable lives as adolescents as well as school pupils. As teenagers, they were enjoying their time being involved in extra-curricular activities organised by the school, and outside school. Their fluency in conversing using the Malay language amazed me. There was one student known as Lai who displayed most fluency in this language. I was truly impressed with her. I would say that the way she spoke and gave her opinions was even better than a Malay student. In fact she spoke the most. From the conversation, I realised that they mostly come from middle-class families. Only one of them worked part-time during the weekends, while the rest were fully enjoying their lives as students. They spoke of receiving full support from their families and friends. In addition, they described their comfort in disclosing their problems with friends and family members. Throughout our conversation, we laughed and had great moments of sharing experiences which we enjoyed most! I turned their attention to discussing their views on counselling.

As I explored their feelings towards counselling services, I quickly sensed their alienation towards the service. They simply considered counselling as exclusively for students in trouble, especially those who have problems or have committed disciplinary offences. They regarded themselves as outside the scope of the service, as they were not involved in any disciplinary problems.

Yuyu replied:

*I don't have any problems so far; that's why I didn't come here.*

Lilo indicated that counselling was considered important and obligatory for those students who had disciplinary problems.

*Students always come here because they have disciplinary problems; so those who do not have any problem should not come here.*

Bobo, Juju and Tiz expressed similar sentiments:

*If I had a big problem, then I should have been referred to counselling."*

*Coming to counselling means I have a big problem, and should be referred to the counsellor.*

*I think those who came here were among those who obtained high demerit points... Anyway I really don't have an idea how the merit-demerit system works, and how far the counsellors manage this system.*

Lai replied:

*Counselling has its own existing image. When people coin the term 'counselling', automatically it signifies the students who have committed disciplinary problems; and hence it prevents other students from getting close to counselling.*

When I asked them how they had first been invited to participate in this research, Lai on behalf of all her friends had expressed her disbelief at coming here:

*We were shocked and afraid... and kept wondering what kind of problems we had.*

I could sense that counselling for them brings about fear and anxiety. They were afraid that they would become labelled as problematic students. This label kept haunting their perceptions. As an educator, I understood their fear of being labelled or stigmatised as bad students. It could somehow lower their self-esteem. Moreover, their positive status as high achievers could explain their discriminatory attitudes. They would do their very best to avoid coming to counselling as a way to protect their dignity and maintain a good impression in front of others. In this case, they would try as much as they could to avoid getting involved in any counselling sessions or optional programmes. If I were in their shoes, I would not want to get myself into trouble too, as I would not wish to be labelled as a troublemaker by my peers, and lose the all advantages of being successful.

Lai remarked:

*I was afraid because some of the students who were referred for counselling were cynically asked by their fellow classmates about why they ended up in a counselling session.*

*They are sick of being seen as troublemaker; it was really a big deal to be viewed so negatively and to be probed by fellow classmates.*

Also like Lai, Jess acknowledged the importance of peers in establishing impressions of counselling.

*I think the most important issue is peers' influence. Most of them said counselling is not good ... being in a counselling room is just like living in hell.*

I was so shocked to hear that receiving counselling was perceived so badly. I could not believe that they would provide such a harsh analogy. For me, it was an indication that counselling services were at a tipping point in their reputation with these students. It indicates students' hopes and needs for an immediate change in the image of school counselling and its reputation. Hence, it is a challenge for this school in general and school counsellors in particular to take the actions required to improve this situation.

Apart from the negative perceptions of counselling services, I was discomforted listening to Lilo who reported counsellors as having nagging characters. This situation had intensified their desire to avoid the service.

*... if you happen to be counselled, you will find lots of condemning and blaming words all around you ... even if you don't understand what the hell they are talking about ... you need to endure your ears listening to their lectures for hours and hours. It was so irritating ...*

I was astonished by the fact that they viewed counsellors as having these negative characteristics. School counsellors were viewed as fierce; the same description they used for their teachers. This image completely contradicted my experience of counsellors and how they worked. I realised that there was a sense of detachment between these participants and counsellors, resulting in their mistrust of counsellors. As a counsellor educator, I remind my students prior to their counselling practicum training to always portray good characteristics such as being understanding, non-judgemental, approachable and compassionate in particular. Little did I expect that counsellors were associated with such negative characteristics.

Lai then explained the reason:

*Some of the students are not so close with their teachers, because sometimes they tend to display their negative images such as having fierce outlooks. So they would assume the same also goes for the counsellor.*

The wide barrier between students and counsellors was evidenced when they reported that some Chinese students experienced an additional language barrier.

Lai expressed:

*I think it is partly due to the language problem. I still remember one of my friends when I was in standard one ... she went to see Mr Liew (Chinese teacher) at that time. She didn't hesitate to express her problem to this teacher.*

As a result, those who have a language barrier will discuss their problems among their fellow friends, Bobo added.

I further sensed that this group of able students also commented on the image and role of counselling. Most of them found that the guidance and counselling unit had delivered few interesting and creative activities. The only activities come across by them were motivational programmes that were considered too academic. The programmes did not appropriately cater for the needs of all students. Furthermore, the counselling service was limited and was not easily accessible to them.

I could feel their limited interest in the counselling activities and programmes as they kept complaining about receiving little chance to demonstrate their potential. They claimed that they could not stand listening to the boring talks repeatedly. Moreover, the image of counselling services was still distorted and overshadowed by disciplinary actions. For them, the service was completely occupied with the act of providing remedial solutions for problematic students.

*We really don't know that counselling has its own activity. Besides, we rarely see the activities on the school's noticeboard, as our class is far away from the main corridor.* (Lilo)

*I would love it if guidance and counselling could provide activities like camping or campfire as part of their motivational programmes.*

(Lai)

One of the students felt that the services did not cater fairly for the needs of students of different racial backgrounds in the school. There was an imbalance in the allocation of programmes, and an uneven participation among certain racial groups of students.

*I think counsellors should organise educational visits, where they can include students of all racial groups like Malay, Chinese and Indian. I was so frustrated that only Malay students managed to get involved in an educational visit to the TV3 station (local TV station) last year. The same also goes for Chinese students; those who were sent to participate in various games were only Chinese, so there is no chance for other racial groups to mingle and mix around.*

(Yuyu)

Lai further suggested that counsellors should be creative in establishing programmes that could generate students' interest and lessen their fear and anxiety towards the service. Guidance and counselling activities should not be confined to certain educational and remedial programmes only, but should be extended to all enjoyable activities.

*I think it would be better if they could organise programmes such as family days ... or any kind of relaxing activities. They shouldn't confine the programmes to those who have committed disciplinary problems only, but they should be extended to all, so that they can be joined by any students regardless of race. In that way, other students will acknowledge the existence of counselling and thus find it easier for them to participate. So it is not confined to troubled students only. They should organise exciting activities for other students as well.*

(Lai)

I could sense that this view was very similar to the views expressed by one Indian girl who was an ex-member of SLAD (a drug prevention club provided by the counselling unit). Based on her observation, she found that students perceived counselling as not popular and strange compared to other clubs in this school.

*Not all students know of the existence of SLAD. It is considered unpopular. For them counselling is something strange and unpopular as compared to other clubs in this school. There are no exciting and creative games offered. No great prizes are given during the game. Moreover there are fewer announcements and promotions provided by counselling ... outdoor activity is also less well served.*

I could sense this student's frustration as she mentioned that the students were not fully enjoying activities in school, particularly guidance and counselling activities. Deep down they craved for more enjoyable and exciting activities that could develop their potential and trigger their interests as students.

This group of Chinese students then discussed further the issue concerning the image of the counselling unit, which they considered as unwelcoming and unfriendly to the students. Most of them considered that the counselling unit was literally out of their sight, and far from their minds. They were uninterested in the existence of the service and its location. Even though there was a big arrow pointing clearly to the location of the unit, they still could not figure out its exact setting and location. The role of the counselling service was not clearly visible and appealing to the students. This resonated with similar accounts from other students when I undertook brief interviews after the school period. Sadly, they still could not figure out the exact location of the counselling unit, despite its strategic location which was near to the administrative building. Worse, they did not even know the name of the school counsellors.

I was then struck by a further statement from Lai regarding the conditions of the unit.

*I feel like I am in the discipline room now. It is quite messy with lots of books... look!!! Spider webs are everywhere.*

(Lai)

*At first, we neither knew who the counsellors were, nor the unit's exact location. We then asked Sherry (our fellow classmate) to show us the direction. Otherwise we wouldn't have reached here.*

(Jess)

*I think there should be a special noticeboard displaying counselling activities, a list of counsellors, and the unit's exact location. Counsellors' pictures should be posted along with their positions.*

(Feng)

*There should also be wordings indicating that counsellors are always ready to help all students, regardless of whether they have committed disciplinary problems or not, and irrespective of race and religion.*

(Bobo)



I found their comments and recommendations to be worthy of serious consideration, as they clearly felt that there was not enough promotion and outreach regarding the meaning and actual functions of counselling. They were left to fill this void in communication by creating negative speculations about the service.

I could discern that deep inside they wanted to join in counselling activities. However, the stigma and negative labelling towards the service had put themselves in a dilemma. They could not wait for the improvement to be done by the service; otherwise it would remain exclusively for students in trouble.

### **Group Interview 2**

I had never expected that I would meet with these Chinese students again. I thought that the previous group interview that I had conducted in this last few weeks with the Chinese students was the last interview for me, as I really had difficulties recruiting Chinese students into this study. However, I was blessed by meeting Chu, a petite Chinese girl who wore glasses. I still remember the day when I saw her sitting alone on a red sofa at the counselling unit one morning. I was curious to know the reasons for her presence. Cautiously, I approached her. I knew it was coming to a dead end attempting to interact with Chinese students in this school. I greeted her, and her warm smile reassured me that my approach was not unwelcome. She said that she was accompanying her friend for a counselling session. From our conversation I found that she did not have any experience in joining any guidance and counselling activities. When I informed her that this unit offered services like career prospects, personality inventories and so on, she expressed great interest in knowing more. I invited her to participate in my interview, and fortunately she agreed to do so.

On the following day as I arrived at the counselling unit, I was pleasantly surprised that a group of four female and one male Chinese students had come to see me. I had not anticipated that Chu would persuade her fellow classmates to join her. I was truly surprised. As they came into the room, I noticed that even two of the counsellors were amazed by their presence. I was proud of their involvement. At some point, I must have

managed to earn their trust, and simultaneously I was demonstrating that their participation was not impossible.

Chu and her other friends, all aged 17, were considered excellent students. Similar to the previous group, they came from the highest rank of form four. They were known as Ah Keong, Jia, Peng, Leng and Ling. All of them were interested in the idea that the unit offered other services, such as career exploration, study skills, analysis of colour and personality and many more. They expressed their disbelief as they discovered the variety of career and personality inventories provided by the unit. Previously they regarded this unit as simply catering for troublesome and problematic students. Little did they realise that it offered more than they would imagine. I could see their glowing faces as I promised to conduct the career and personality inventories with them on the following day.

This group also shared with me some very negative views on the image of counselling services and counsellors. All of them agreed that the image portrayed by counsellors had disconcerted them. They reported experiencing negative situations when they were bombarded with negative comments from a counsellor, after trying to give several comments regarding one of the compulsory programmes that they had attended. Ah Keong, the only boy in this group, described this experience. I listened attentively to his account:

*...//.. in the orientation programme, there was one teacher (counsellor) who asked us to give opinions regarding the effectiveness of the programme conducted. She asked us to tell the truth. Sadly, when we commented that the programme was so boring, she began scolding us and refused to accept her weaknesses. We were really shocked seeing her reaction. Worse, she even blamed us for not having positive attitudes. So, we decided to be silent as it was not worth saying anything, otherwise we would be blamed again.*

He added:

*Sometimes I have a feeling that some of the teachers are not very sincere in their job. They just teach us for the sake of money and not for the welfare of students.*

Indeed, I discerned that he was deeply affected by the treatment received from that counsellor. The school counsellor was portrayed as being closed-minded and defensive. The students had even expressed their doubts regarding the honesty of counsellors and schoolteachers in conducting their duties. This experience made him and his friends avoid the service. I was intrigued by this boy's statement. He was truly brave in disclosing his feelings towards counsellors and his schoolteachers. Probably he felt less threatened, aware that I was merely an outsider who was really curious about the counselling service of this school.

Ah Keong's friend, Leng, then enlightened me about other issues pertaining to the content of guidance and counselling activities. She added that the programme they had attended was dull and boring:

*There were no exciting activities in the orientation programme. They (counsellors) only carried out physical activities which took so long to complete. Furthermore, they gave very long information about certain subjects like chemistry, biology and so on, which we already knew.*

I sensed that these students expected programmes or activities that were worthwhile to join in. They tended to be selective in the kinds of activities that would interest them and provide them enjoyment. Furthermore, they were not willing to simply accept the programmes organised for them, but they would critically evaluate the content as well as the capability of the presenters. This provides a totally a different picture from my observation of counsellors' roles and duties a few years ago. Most students were exposed to the same modules of a programme or activity each year. Even worse, little was done to update to or restructure the programmes or activities so that they could progressively challenge students' ability. Nevertheless, most of the students at that time simply accepted the programmes without too much complaint. I realised that nowadays we are living in a global world; we can easily obtain information at our fingertips. Indeed, it was totally different compared to my own teenage life, 20 years ago. During those days, there was limited use of the internet; no Facebook, Twitter or any fancy video games for me to be involved in, such as Nintendo Wii, XBox or PS3. I just enjoyed my mundane life as a student and teenager by hanging out with my friends or just staying at home spending time with my family members. I admit that they are very different circumstances for today's teenagers. They can easily access any activities or

information that interest them from all corners of the world. Therefore, it was not a surprise to me that those students craved more interesting activities that could challenge their minds and lives. It is inevitable that a greater challenge awaits all counsellors today to accommodate the needs of teenage students.

I could sense that other members of the group began to nod and offer their views. They seemed to agree with their fellow friends' previous statements.

*There should be exciting activities served for us, for example [that offer us] the opportunity to do the tasks by ourselves, like doing assignments etc. so that we can understand what we are doing.* (Lai)

*I really hope that I can join field trips, but as for now I haven't heard of anything being organised.* (Jess)

Ling further commented on the poor condition of many infrastructures in the school, which obviously made the current situation worse.

*... the school hall was very hot and too noisy at that time. The students tend to be noisy, particularly at the back, because they felt uneasy and bored, and didn't understand what the teachers were talking about.*

I could feel their need for improvements. They craved more vibrant and exciting activities. At the same time they hungered for a better infrastructure to live in. Deep inside, they were hoping that the counselling service and school counsellors could provide them avenues to develop their potential appropriately; otherwise they would remain of no significance to them.

## Stories of self-referred clients

### “We belong together”

#### Group interview of female Indian school pupils

*I looked at my watch. It was fifteen minutes past 9. I was on my way to the unit. As I got nearer to the unit, I heard voices and laughter. I could tell it was coming from a large group of students. Girls, yes girls', voices. What were they doing here? It was still early. I checked my watch again. I could not be wrong. I braced myself. I entered the unit. I saw all of them in pinafores except for the only girl who wore baju kurung (white top and light blue sarongs, the school uniform usually worn by female Malay students). I noticed they were smiling at me. I was torn, wondering whether to frown out of concern at their unexpected appearance. One of the girls then explained their purpose in being there. They had made an appointment earlier with Madam Fazura as they wanted to get her advice regarding time management. This is great, I affirmed. My face was glowing with positivity towards them. I was very happy to meet six Indian girls with such positive attitudes. What made me even happier was that I had been given the chance by Madam Fazura to replace her to conduct guidance, as she had to attend an ad hoc meeting with a parent. The girl and I had a good time. We were laughing and chatted non-stop. I had the feeling that everything was going my way.*

*Field notes: 22 August 2009*

That was my initial thought when I encountered this group of students. Their way of presenting themselves, including their appearance and behaviour, had really put me at ease. I was so pleased to meet them. I named them as Kareena, Simala, Karisma, Aishwarya, Nirmala and Neeha of form four (17 years old).

They seemed to be well attached to the service and had a strong belief that counselling would offer something beneficial to them. Based on our conversation, I was astounded that they viewed counsellors as very important figures in their lives, besides friends and

families. They put their trust completely in counsellors as experts to guide them. They willingly shared their feelings with counsellors despite their differences in terms of racial backgrounds.

*The counselling room is like our second classroom.*

*(Kareena)*

*If we come here we always end up feeling refreshed. It is not just when we have problems that we come here; we just love to be here.*

*(Simala)*

*We will feel uneasy if we do not come here every day.*

*(Karisma)*

*We must come here every day to meet counsellors.*

*(Aishwarya)*

*... it is not just when we have problems that we come here.*

*(Nirmala)*

*If we want to enquire about studies, to get advice, or anything else, then we also can come here, not just when we have problems.*

*(Neeha)*

Their views were indeed contradicting the perceptions of previous groups presented earlier. I was wondering what encouraged them to think and act in this way. What were the sources of strength and support they received that made them quite attached to the counsellors? As I explored this notion with them, I discovered that their positive beliefs towards counsellors and counselling services were particularly influenced by the way they were exposed to them.

*Counsellors always like to guide us and encourage us.*

*(Simala)*

*Because teachers (counsellors) are so helpful and kind, moreover they are not biased. They treat us fairly, regardless of race and who we are.*

*(Karisma)*

*Kind, beautiful ... Their gentle and soft words motivated us. They always like to call us with endearments like dear or darling. Moreover, they always text us messages and even phoned us at night. That to us is really something; they really care for our wellbeing*

*(Neeha)*

*If I forgot to call them, they are the ones who will say 'good night dear, sweet dreams'. Normally teacher Nora and teacher Rohaya would always say that to us.*

*(Kareena)*

This group extensively experienced attention from school counsellors, who treated them warmly, with nurturing relationships and a secure emotional bond (Angus and Kagan, 2007). They seemed to be grateful and appreciative of the roles and presence of school counsellors. Indeed, they were moved and touched by these characteristics. I discern that these types of positive characteristics were due to considerable understanding and strong beliefs in counselling. As a result, they could protect the nobility of the service by giving positive descriptions of counselling to their friends and teachers. This situation could explain the overwhelming intimacy which had developed between them and the school counsellors, as compared to other groups of students.

Nevertheless, they could not hide the fact that they had also encountered bitter experiences with regards to others' perceptions. There were times that they were showered with negative impressions from others, including teachers and friends, upon their act of coming to the counselling room. Simala reported:

*... just now when I wanted to come here, immediately my friends asked me why I wanted to come here. They said "Do you have any problems?" Politely I said, no, I just wanted to see my counsellor."*

Neeha encountered similar negativity when she wanted to obtain permission from her class teacher to see the counsellor.

*When I showed her the appointment letter, she started to express her shock. Immediately she asked me why, why should I come here; did I commit any big problems? I said no. I just wanted to see my counsellor, that's it. Well, I think this is all about mindset.*

I was relieved listening to their stories. Indeed they possessed firm views regarding their beliefs in counselling. Although they received lots of suspicion and stigma from others, they appeared strong in their convictions.

As I explored their family backgrounds, I found that most of them received positive support from their parents. Their parents encouraged them to share and discuss things with their teachers as well as with counsellors.

Kareena proudly said the encouragement that she received from her parents did partly contribute to her positive acceptance towards the service.

*My family never viewed counselling negatively. They encouraged and even advised me to regard counselling as a way to improve myself. Indeed my father always encourages me to be a disciplined person.*

Moreover, Kareena's surroundings revolve around an environment which consists of different racial backgrounds, which she admitted gave her a better acceptance to other races:

*They are OK, because we are not only close to our race but also mingle with others (races). My father's friends are all Malay. We live in a neighbourhood area that contains a mixture of different races. So, it's kind of a normal thing for us.*

Immersing myself in the interview processes had brought me into a wonderful kind of experience. Indeed, in my encounter with this group, I was touched by the emotional nature of qualitative research. I had never imagined that my involvement in this research would lead me into many new insights. These research processes unexpectedly affirmed the meaning of collaborative relationships and its therapeutic impact on participants. I was also struck by the powerful impact of stories in the process of meaning-making and the formation of participants' identities. Furthermore, I have learnt the importance of having a secure and trusted counselling environment in students' lives. The experience of this group had enlightened me.

Nevertheless, I was eager to discover others' voices and perspectives, especially the experience of the school counsellors' stories. They would have their own significant answers to all variations in claims and comments given by students. These surely would add to the richness and depth of insights into the contribution of school counselling.



## CHAPTER 7

### SCHOOL COUNSELLORS' STORIES

#### **“The Plight of School Counsellors”**

My journey continues to widen the lens of the interpretive horizons by giving voice to another group within the school community. After listening to the students' voice, I was curious to understand what had happened in the counselling services. I likened my efforts to finding and fitting together pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. The entire picture would be incomplete if even a single piece was missing. Hence, as a researcher who embraces the principles of social constructivism and interpretivism, I felt it my responsible not only to find and fit all the pieces together, but also to open up all issues which I believe were significant aspects of interpretive angles in order to understand the riddle. In the midst of pursuing my effort to understand the school counsellors' stories, I could not help but to admit that there were hurdles that I needed to encounter and get over.

#### **“Facing the hurdles”**

*I was sitting alone and coldness engulfed me. I looked around blankly. Nobody was here! Nobody was in this room. Sigh! Three weeks had gone and yet I still could not find the right time to establish any group interview with the school counsellors. I could not find a single day that they could be together in this unit and free themselves from any activities. The only scenario that I could observe was their hurried pace of going in and out of the unit. I could hear a few footsteps coming into the room. A few minutes later, as I was about to direct my steps towards them, I was again frustrated. Their footsteps hurried towards the door and left me alone again wondering in this room. I sank myself in the sofa hoping for other counsellors. One thing that I realised was that they were very busy and fully occupied. However, I could also sense that they were partly attempting to cover their anxiety from being observed by me. Again, I decided to refrain from voicing my*

*intention to interview them, as they were already aware from our previous conversations.*

*Field notes: 22 July 2009*

I admit that at first, I felt awkward putting myself among school counsellors. Would they be comfortable working with me? Would my presence create uneasiness? I realised that I did not have extensive experience as a school counsellor. Previously, as a lecturer, my daily life was bounded by my tasks and responsibilities of lecturing, supervising and doing research. I was not fully exposed to the lived experiences of school counsellors. I found my previous exposure to the educational institution was insufficient to understand the real live climate of school counselling.

I was aware that my status as an outsider in the unit made them restless. They felt awkward to interact with me, as they perceived that I held a higher status and position than them. During my first few weeks in the school, I could see that they were cautious in displaying their feelings openly. I could sense their aloofness to me. At times I felt that they purposely went out of their way to avoid having an interview session with me. My intuition was right. I still remember the text messages that I received from the head of the school counsellors.

*Madam Nora: Hi, I just wondered whether you are feeling ok or not being in this school, I'm so sorry if we are not able to assist you as well as you might expect.*

*(5.15 pm)*

*Researcher: Don't say that Madam, actually I'm so happy to be here. My intention is to learn as much as I can from you and the rest of the counsellors here. I would love to understand how students perceive counselling and see whether we can improve this situation together.*

*(5.25 pm)*

*Madam Nora: Well, I'm so relieved to hear that you can accept our condition here.*

*(5.27 pm)*

*25th July 2009: Original text message translated.*

These messages astounded me. I could sense that my presence and my position as a researcher made her restless. I presumed the other counsellors might feel the same way. Immediately, I sought to ease their apprehensions. I explained clearly my role as a researcher who tried to co-construct meanings together with them. I regarded them as experts in their fields by emphasising that my research would be meaningless without their participation. I knew words meant nothing without action.

Hence, to bridge the gap, willingly, I offered my service to do counselling sessions as well as to replace them in the classroom during relief periods. I tried to mingle with them during counselling activities. I went back late from school and joined counsellors to do their activities. I even joined students and counsellors to do mural paintings in one of the school's building blocks. In addition, I offered my ideas for counselling activities during the extra-curriculum day, which was organised annually by the school administration. They were surprised to see me seated among a group of students handling a brainstorming slot for the programme. Slowly, I noticed that they accepted me as part of them. Eventually, we managed to exchange jokes as well as spend our time together.

Therefore, as a novice researcher, I realised that accommodating and adapting skills to fit one's environment is crucial. The issue of power relations is considered inherent in the research process. Indeed, it requires wisdom to deal with my co-participants. There is no clear-cut way of resolving them. The art of negotiation, re-negotiation, sense of respect and understanding are of paramount importance. Admittedly, I was mostly concerned with the process of my research and therefore my approach was mainly self-directed. I also wanted to fit in at the school and get to know the students. Slowly, as I became absorbed with the research process, I realised my intention was not simply to accomplish the aim of my research. The ability to comprehend knowledge and obtain a thorough understanding of the research issues is the most important aspect I needed to consider.

There were eight full time school counsellors working in this school – one male and seven females. I name them as Madam Rohaya, Madam Asma, Madam Hamidah, Madam Rose, Madam Nora, Madam Fara, Madam Fazura and Mr Siva. I was blessed

that I managed to have interviews with seven of them excluding Madam Fazura, as she was busy handling motivational programme conducted outside school. Despite that, I managed to have a casual conversation with her on the first day I arrived at this school (see Chapter 4).

This chapter discusses the collective narratives of seven school counsellors concerning their views on students' values, as well as their own values towards counselling services. In addition, it also highlights school counsellors' efforts and hopes in negotiating their identities, roles and positions in the school community. I choose to present all of school counsellors' collective stories as their narratives were unique and compelling. I think their stories provide a rich description of counselling services in the school, as well as offering a thorough understanding of students and school communities' values and attitudes towards the service from their own perspectives.

### **“It's blood, sweat, and sometimes tears”**

I had my first interview session with Madam Rohaya, a petite female counsellor who had a lovely face and an attractive demeanour. It was a great pleasure meeting her as she was also a former student of mine. She was in her late 20's and considered the youngest among all the counsellors in this school. Upon completion of the Guidance and Counselling course in 2007, she had been appointed as a full time school counsellor for the past year. She regarded the first year of her career as full of challenges. She reported how she was not really welcomed by the school administrators during the first day of her registration in the school. They acted indifferently towards her and that situation quite puzzled her at first. Then she learnt that they had expected to receive a male counsellor in this school due to the large number of female counsellors. I noticed how frustrated she was from the tone of her voice.

Her situation was further aggravated when she experienced an intense cultural shock. She had to face students of different racial backgrounds. She felt awkward and worried since she had only been exposed to Malay students during her previous counselling placement. Her anxiety was intensified when she faced reluctance and resistant clients.

*I still remember when I was here during my first few days of my posting. I felt like I was useless. I didn't know what I should do. I was terribly lost and couldn't handle myself with the new job. I did nothing for the first three months of my posting. The only thing that I did was come to school every day and go home on time. I felt restless. I was so stressed. I had no clients at all. I was crying frequently. I tried to apply for a transfer to other schools. I could say that the situation in this school was different compared to my previous practicum training. Before this, I did not have to wait for my clients. They came in without any hesitation. In fact, at one point I didn't even have time for a lunch break.*

Her initial story moved me. I could imagine her situation. She was experiencing a tough transition from being appreciated as a counsellor trainee during her previous placement, to the act of rejection and withdrawal in this new situation. She was young and naïve. She expected that the internship and the real school setting would be similar. Her expectation turned out to be wrong. The school was totally different from the previous school in which she had served. Even worse, she found it was hard to place herself in this school as well as to fit in as a real counsellor in the new school culture. Hence, she thought the best solution for her at that time was to escape from the problem.

Her vulnerability alarmed the head of the school counsellors who gave her endless support and encouragement. She was given continuous advice and motivation to face the situation. Slowly she realised her weaknesses. As the time passed by, she learned to face challenges. Her confidence and determination strengthened. She then bravely encountered students and learned how to handle them.

During our conversation, I noticed how different she was compared to her undergraduate years. She spoke confidently and showed her passion intensely in fulfilling her responsibility. Her body language showed how much she loved her role as a counsellor. Obviously, she knew what she was doing and was well versed with her role as a school counsellor. I also watched her closely from afar. I could see her maturity in dealing with students of different racial backgrounds. There was no doubt that she was considered one of the favourite counsellors in this school. In fact, every day I caught up with the same Chinese girl who waited to see her. I found it quite bizarre, and discreetly I discovered that this student adored her very much. This was

evidenced when I overheard the remark of other students' calling this girl Madam Rohaya's adopted daughter.

When asked about the students' views of counselling, she eloquently described her experience of dealing with students. During my interview with her, she told me that she had just finished the session with one male Chinese student who was referred for a counselling session. She expressed her pain at how she needed to "hunt" for the boy in the classroom. The boy had to be politely persuaded otherwise he would refuse to come due to his apprehension towards counselling. She emphasised that Chinese students needed to be pushed to come forward otherwise counsellors would end up with no clients at all.

*Usually I encountered the problem with underachievers, when they received the letter asking them to come forward, they simply threw it away.*

*If we asked them to come for the next session, they asked us back, "Why we have to come, are we going to be suspended from school?" They always relate counselling with disciplinary action.*

Madam Rohaya added that obviously students, especially the Chinese, tend to associate counselling with students being in trouble. They simply avoided counselling due to the fear of being negatively labelled by their fellow students. They did not want their classmates to see them as freaks, troublemakers, or gangsters or be stigmatised with other bad connotations. She mentioned that she dealt more with Indian clients rather than Chinese students, as they were more receptive to the service. Furthermore, Chinese students tended to avoid coming to counselling individually. They would prefer their friends to come along with them and if they did come, they would come just to restore their merit points without understanding the benefit of that service.

*We couldn't meet those (Chinese students) individually because they wouldn't come. They kept on asking why they were called for, and their friends started to say that they might have certain disciplinary problems. So the best way is by having them in a group. That's the only solution for them to be able to come here.*

*...//.. we tried to build a relationship with them, tried to encourage them, tried to explain what counselling is all about, but to no avail. The only thing that they wanted to know was how to gain their merit points.*

She further explained the challenge faced by the school counsellors in handling the underachievers and high achievers during the counselling programme.

*...//.. we had put the underachievers in a small place along with three discipline teachers, so that we could observe them. However, they only maintained their behaviour for one hour. We couldn't organise a one day programme, because students tend to make lots of noise and be playful.*

*...//.. excellent students didn't bother much about our programme; they regarded themselves as brilliant enough ...that they don't need the motivational programme anymore; moreover, excellent students tend to be boastful.*

Similar observations were made by two other counsellors, Madam Hamidah and Madam Asma. Madam Asma was also a former student of mine. She served in the morning session while Madam Hamidah served in the afternoon session. Madam Hamidah was appointed as a full time school counsellor in this school three years ago. Unlike Madam Hamidah, Madam Asma started this role two years ago. Previously, she worked as a primary schoolteacher before pursuing her degree in Guidance and Counselling. Madam Asma appeared to be considered as a junior in this career compared to Madam Hamidah, even though the former was older than the latter.

Both expressed their annoyance at the ignorant attitudes they received from students during counselling programmes. There was no consideration given to them as counsellors let alone respect for their efforts and hard work. Painstakingly, Madam Hamidah and Madam Asma conveyed their poignant expressions about the negative acceptance of counselling during guidance activities with whole classes of students.

*We can see the differences in terms of students' acceptance towards the programme. Excellent students did their own works and just ignored the talks because they think such a programme was really wasting their time. They put their highest values on their tuition classes outside school rather than the*

*academic programmes provided by this school. They also started to make comparisons between two.*

**(Madam Hamidah)**

*... we really ran out of ideas and modules to handle the programme as we needed to conduct it for three days. The students kept complaining why they have been served with the same modules ... at that time, they didn't want to listen and started to play around. Ironically, when we asked them to produce something creative based on activities given with the intention to avoid their boredom, they didn't want to listen instead they made fun out of our instructions. They started to play around and mock the things given; they just threw them away like rubbish.*

**(Madam Hamidah)**

*We also managed to organise the programme for the high risk students consisting of Indian students. During the ice-breaking activities, they were required to hold balloons and to ensure that they wouldn't be blown away. Sadly, they didn't follow our instructions; instead they had blown their balloon away and started to do the same with the others. The situation turned out to be chaotic and uncontrolled. Other students started to cry. They didn't seem to respect us.*

**(Madam Asma)**

I listened attentively to each and every word uttered by them; occasionally I frowned, and without realising I also let out a deep sigh. I understood how hard it was for them. I was speechless. This was really a mind-boggling experience. I could see how perturbed they were. Such experiences could drive them to despair. The job demanded them to have abundant patience and creativity. They felt belittled by students' reactions from various groups of students. Troublesome students obviously withdrew themselves from participating in counselling programmes. High achievers seemed to be doubtful about the benefits and importance of the programmes. They were emotionally disconnected from counsellors and counselling programmes. Their motivation seemed to be totally diminished and gone.



During the session, I found that Madam Hamidah was enthusiastic in conveying her story. Although she was heavily pregnant with her second child, she was in high spirits and devoted to performing her role. I could see her eager determination in fulfilling her responsibility. She would patiently serve all her students, irrespective of different racial backgrounds by endlessly giving them guidance and advice. Similarly, Madam Asma also displayed dedication in her work as I always saw her returning home late after school hours. Although the official time for counsellors in the morning session was from 7.20 am until 2.30 pm, she was willing to stay back. She dedicated most of her evening to counselling sessions and running errands for the counselling programme.

Despite their hard work and 'never say die' attitude towards the school and their profession, Madam Hamidah related stories of manipulation by students.

*.../. One day, I had encouraged students to join the PROSTAR club (Healthy without AIDS Programmes for Youth), which is under the counselling club. I mentioned that this club could provide them with knowledge on how to protect them from being involved in unhealthy sexual relationships. To my surprise, the students started gossiping among themselves saying that I tried to teach them to do sex. I was so stressed; everything that I said was manipulated and interpreted negatively by the students.*

The same feeling was also shared by another counsellor who was known as Madam Rose, a senior counsellor in the afternoon session. As a school counsellor in her early 40's she expressed her bewilderment when she compared the indifferent treatment that she received from students now compared to the previous nine years of her experience. She eloquently recalled her past pleasant experience dealing with students of different racial backgrounds.

*They (students) were great. When I was with them in the classroom, they were very close to me. They came and met me in the counselling room. At that time, there were many high profile cases like incest; rape, etc. All of them came here regardless of their racial group – Malay, Chinese and Indian. They regarded this room as a place to express their emotion. I can see the situation is different compared to the previous years. During those years, I could vividly remember how Chinese students willingly waved their hands saying 'hi' to me. Even my*

*colleagues from different schools had expressed their surprise to see how close the students were at that time."*

*Now they (Chinese's students) are totally different. Previously, when I came into the classroom, they would pay attention... but now they ignore me and keep doing their work... I think excellent students are even worse; they tend to display a boastful attitude.*

Unfortunately she was not only receiving a negative response from Chinese and Indian students, she was also subjected to a hostile refusal from students of her own racial background.

*I have an experience with two Malay female students.. One of them said what the heck is counselling for. Its bullshit, she even burst out with lots of condemning and nonsense words. I tried to persuade her to enter the room. Surprisingly she refused by saying she would never set foot inside, never. Then I asked her why? She said counselling is only meant for students in trouble, if I were to be here, surely I will be terminated from my post as a school prefect and my mother always warned me not to come here because this room is not meant for me; it is only for those (troubled) groups.*

Frankly, as a researcher, those stories triggered within me an understanding of the changing patterns in students' attitudes. I sensed that their behaviour might be attributed to the transition in their culture. They were very bold and expressive in showing their resistance to counselling. When I compared this situation, it was totally different from my previous school experience from 20 years before. Although we had certain dissatisfactions with teachers, we did not dare to express them openly. We just kept silent and tried our very best to accommodate our needs and the school communities accordingly.

A similar view was also shared by Madam Fara who also served as an afternoon school counsellor. This was her second school, as she sought a transfer to follow her husband who was also a teacher in a neighbouring primary school. She described her experience in this school as challenging. She reported that she was trapped in the same boat like Madam Rohaya during her first few months of her transfer. As a young and new school counsellor, she was left muddling along with no clients at all for three months

consecutively. She found that the only regular attendees were referred clients who were only interested in approaching Madam Rose, who was the senior counsellor at that time. This situation made her distressed. She did not know what to do. Her upsetting situation led Madam Rose to reallocate a few of her referred clients for her to handle. Slowly, she gained confidence to approach those referred students. For the past three years of her service in this school she admitted that students kept on associating counselling with only one group known as troublesome students.

*... when I asked them what they understand about counselling, spontaneously they said it is for troublesome students only. They kept mentioning the same thing repeatedly. As a result, underachievers always become our guests in this room.*

I could feel the stigma of counselling perceived by students. They were afraid of receiving a bad label from teachers and friends as this action could tarnish their image.

According to Madam Fara, students did not receive a clear picture regarding the counselling services. There was insufficient exposure being given to them about the role of counselling. Their perceptions seemed to be clouded by negative connotations and the stigma about counselling.

*I have a case of one brilliant student who was referred by her class teacher because she seemed to be out of focus in her study. At first she was reluctant to come. After having the session, she was struck with the true colour of counselling. She gained insights and was able to overcome her problem. She told me that she had understood her difficulty and was really grateful for my help. After the session I always see her smile.*

The same disappointment was shared by the only male counsellor who was newly appointed to the school. He was known as Mr Siva, the only Indian counsellor who happened to be a former student of mine as well. He was the last person I interviewed in this school, as he was busy juggling the different demands of his new role. He had only arrived at this school three weeks before me.

Mr. Siva, who was in his late 20's expressed his frustration regarding the students' negative acceptance and misconception of counselling. In his three-months at this school, he could feel that the concept and meaning of counselling had not been grasped or adequately understood by students. Misunderstandings existed around the role and purpose of school counsellors. As a result, a few students did not appreciate the existence of the service and readily made fun of it.

*My personal view is that students do not seem to understand what counselling is all about. They simply regard counsellors as their saviour from disciplinary action.*

*Referred students consider counselling as part of school games and tricks. They neither understand the exact role of counselling nor know the purpose of their suspension from school.*

When asked about the factors related to these negative values and attitudes towards the service, all counsellors recounted that the structural issues facing students and school communities such as language barriers and lack of school physical facilities.

Madam Fara for example highlighted that the issue of language barrier was particularly noticeable in a few Chinese students who had difficulty in expressing their problems using the official language, Malay. This issue had indirectly affected her and she had to put more effort into the counselling task.

*I don't have any problem handling Malay students as they understand what I say. A few Chinese students unfortunately have a language barrier. In one of my sessions, my client only nodded without saying a word. I did all the talking and was really exhausted. Even worse, I needed to teach them to write their oath letter because they didn't know how to write it in the Malay language.*

*At one time I needed to ask other students who understood the Chinese language to act as an interpreter. After the translation, only then did the student respond. Chinese students have more difficulty with the Malay language compared to Indian students.*

In addition to language barriers, lack of school infrastructure and manpower were also identified as contributors to this problem.

Madam Nora for example, who was the head of school counsellors, commented on school structural systems which according to her had contributed to this issue. As an experienced school counsellor for nearly 15 years, she could observe how students and school community exhibited their negative attitudes to the school as well as to the services. She mentioned:

*For me there are many factors contribute to this problem... it might be the school surrounding.. no conducive classroom.. there are many old buildings here, with high number of students*

*... moreover, some of the teachers do not quite even know each other...sometimes they don't bother to come to the classroom.*

(Madam Nora)

On a similar note, Mr Siva commented:

*I think the number of teachers does not sufficiently accommodate the needs of high number of students.*

*... I think the barriers include the infrastructure, I mean the condition of the room does not protect the clients' confidentiality so far.*

(Mr Siva)

Madam Hamidah also touched on the infrastructure issue particularly the poor condition of school main hall that indirectly affected the service.

*... as you can see the condition of the hall is not really conducive, no sound proof and the worst part is that it is really hot ...*

(Madam Hamidah)

The other issue that was raised by Madam Nora was the school disciplinary system, which was considered weak due to the poor monitoring system. It was no surprise that students tended to be disrespectful of the school rules and dared to make fun of them.

*I can say there are a pros and cons in this system. There are many cases in which no action is taken against students, even though they have earned 600 or 700 points. One student boasted that despite having earned 600 points, he wasn't afraid of getting suspended from school (200 points were the maximum points leading to suspension). They also observed many cases in which their friends who were suspended from school managed to re-enrol... they didn't bother at all about how many penalty points they had accrued.*

From the stories told by counsellors, I could picture the students' sense of estrangement from the service. They did not seem to appreciate the existing counselling programme. I still remember the incident where the head of the counsellors needed to persuade a group of Chinese students who refused to join the compulsory motivation programme. She tried her very best to conduct a special session for these students who had no faith or trust in the programme and did not wish to participate. I could feel that there was a sense of incongruence of expectations or a mismatch of interests between the students and counsellors. Students seemed to be drifting along in their own way. They were far from knowing the importance of the service. I could imagine how painstaking the process was to reach the students, irrespective of which group they belong; underachievers, high achievers, students in trouble or in difficulty. Counsellors were experiencing considerable pain in the struggle to win their hearts. Deep down, I could feel the counsellors' frustration because everything they did was left unappreciated. Counsellors intensely desired acceptance from the students.

## **“When two worlds collide”**

*As I made my way to the counselling room, I stumbled upon a group consisting of seven Malay Muslim boys who were clustered together in the balcony outside the religious education classroom. I knew at that time they were waiting for their teacher to come and start the lesson. Conspicuously, they were involved in chatting, which was followed by frequent loud giggles. My presence of walking beside them did not seem to have any effect on them. They simply continued to laugh and tease each other.*

Field notes: 15 August 2009

### **“Students’ changing values”**

This scenario was not fiction. It was my actual experience. I considered it as noteworthy and odd as I rarely experienced this type of situation during my previous experience in school when I was a pupil. I could remember my time as a student twenty years ago. My friends and I would patiently wait for our teachers in the classroom. We did not dare to loiter outside classrooms during the lessons, as we knew that strict punishment would promptly follow. For me, school is a place of honour and respect. It is a place where knowledge and skills are inculcated and the well being of the students are promoted. However, in this school, the students’ rowdiness was not being controlled. It appeared that these students had become less attached and lost faith in the benefits of school. They became less affected with school and tended to exert a negative influence on other students.

All counsellors collectively admitted that there was no sense of community and belonging displayed by students towards the school. They were far from recognising the school as part of their lives. They only came to school for their own personal enjoyment and to escape from doing their household chores.

Madam Asma and Madam Hamidah unanimously commented upon the attitude of several students whom they perceived as not having a sense of purpose in coming to school. They came to class with no preparation, without pencil or paper, without books, and without completed homework. They just wanted to have fun in school with their fellow friends. They not only displayed a lack of respect towards the teachers but also boldly blamed their teachers for the boring lessons.

*I asked the students in trouble regarding their disobedience of the school's rules and regulations. They said they felt sick of following rules. They have grown up and wanted to try something challenging. When people said that loafing around and playing truant were exciting, they said that they had wanted to try them out themselves and had found that they were really exciting.*

(Madam Hamidah)

*Male students did not blame themselves for what had happened. They started blaming teachers for the boring lessons, while the teacher was teaching; they played among themselves at the back of the classroom.*

(Madam Asma)

Mr. Siva articulately described that students, regardless of underachievers or high achievers, ostentatiously displayed their withdrawal to school in their own distinct ways.

*These students regard school as the best place for them to expose and extend their identities.*

*... no one takes care of them, no concern from teachers. They already knew the tricks and games of this school, they said if they break the rules, the teacher will only put their names in the log book, so they just do it, no punishment given, if they happen to be called by discipline teachers, they will fabricate the story... that's the school culture.*



*I think whether they are excellent or underachievers, the same condition prevails. Both have an equal tendency to play truant. It is just how they do it. I went through the case of an excellent student who did the same thing but in a different way. It took 20 minutes for him to go to the toilet and return to the classroom. It's true that he went to the toilet but in a slow and relaxed mode. He just stared from one class to another. He was simply killing time.*

*I could see a trend among them in that they were very happy to receive a letter from us (counselling unit) as it meant they could skip one hour of their class. Ironically, they knew nothing about the impact of counselling on them.*

Madam Fara also expressed her frustration concerning the attitudes of students towards her as a counsellor. Immediately, she recalled these two incidents, which she considered as unforgettable experiences for her.

*I still remember how I was so tense with one Indian boy who failed to show any respect to me. I had been patient with his crude behaviour for almost a year. One day, I was very angry with him because he simply went out from the classroom without my permission. Repeatedly, I asked him to stay in the classroom. To my surprise, he simply scolded and yelled at me without any sense of guilt. He even blamed me and fabricated the story saying that I had asked him earlier to go out. At that time, my patience was really challenged. I felt as if I was humiliated by my own student. Suddenly I burst into tears and subsequently cried in front of the students. All of them immediately kept quiet as they were surprised by my sudden response.*

In another incident she added

*.../. At that time my class was in the last hour of the day. Although there was about 10 minutes left, I noticed the students had already packed their stuff, with their bags on their shoulder, they gathered impatiently in front of the classroom's door waiting for the bell to be rung. They scurried and pushed each other to the door. They did not bother to look at me at all. I felt as if I was invisible.*

These statements made me wonder. Was this the new school culture? Students seemed to enjoy themselves outside classrooms more than happily spending their time in the lessons. They seemed to be deviated from the usual life styles of school students. Was it too burdensome to be in school and to study in class? It seems to me that there was a new youth culture hitting young people in this school. I wondered why this new generation of students behaved so contradictorily. Did the student-teacher relationship cause them to behave negatively? Had the educational methods failed to meet the students' needs? Were they too didactic and formal thereby causing the students to be less attached to school? I remembered my schooldays many years ago. Students did excuse themselves for the toilet or sickbay, but that only happened when they were in dire need, and none would hang out or loiter around, and would certainly not smoke in the school compound as they were afraid of getting caught.

Madam Hamidah also recalled her previous frustration handling students in the classroom. She illustrated:

*I had once tried out the concept of rewards and reinforcement. At one time I started to give students some chocolates if they managed to answer all the questions successfully. Then the following day, they kept on asking if there were any chocolates to be given. At that time there was one student who didn't manage to answer the questions. Abruptly, he started arguing and questioning why I did not treat him well. He said, "it's better for me not to study because whatever I do, I won't get anything."*

It seems to me that the concept of reward in teaching somehow failed to attract the students' attention to sustain their interests in the classroom. They might expect other methods of education that could bring back their interests. They might in need of different approaches which much more personalised to where they are. In other words they might crave for more understanding from teachers and the school community.

This kind of negative attitudes in learning had subsequently enabled the students to extend their bad influence to other students in this school. This situation happened to Madam Hamidah who mentioned that other counsellors had also become students' prey.

Apparently, students did not seem to feel ashamed and guilty about their crude behaviour.

*I heard from one of my colleagues that there was a 14 -year old boy who dared to share with her about the best technique to have sex.*

*...I also had one Indian student who came to me and admitted that he didn't even know anything about sexual intercourse, yet he was involved in it without him realizing it.*

*Indian students seem to be in a chaotic situation in terms of sexual education. They seem to have lost their traditions.*

*... boys or girls regardless of whether Malay or Indian did not feel ashamed about hugging each other.*

I could sense that there was no sense of respect towards them either as teachers or as counsellors. As an educator, I came to the view that if they could not display respect to the teacher who obviously taught them in the classroom, the failure to show respect to the counsellor would definitely be greater as they rarely had classes and stayed secluded in their room.

Certainly as an educator, I felt upset upon hearing about the awful treatment experienced by counsellors. They were facing a very tough time dealing with students. Nonetheless, my pity also went to the students' situation too. They did not have sufficient knowledge about healthy lifestyles. They appeared to be oblivious and trapped in their own worlds. They did not bother to comprehend their outer world. They seemed complacent about doing things in their own territory or comfort zone. They were left all alone without guidance.

#### **“Lost in the hardship of life”**

From my interviews, most counsellors agreed that the students in difficulties had not only lost their sense of direction in school. The students were also facing hardship and tribulations in their family lives. These situations could be attributed to their family environment and socio economic class.

Throughout school counsellors' experiences of handling clients, they described that most students in difficulty came from disorganised families characterised by a lack of religious beliefs and concern from their loved ones. There were incidents in which Malay Muslim parents displayed their estrangement from religion. They were distanced from the religious teachings and simply permitted their children to do harmful and immoral behaviour. This was framed by Madam Rohaya and Madam Nora.

*One Muslim boy mentioned to me that his parents did not care about religion. He said beers are just like Coke in my house, there's a lot in our fridge.*

(Madam Rohaya)

*Muslim boys lack religious knowledge, they don't pray just like their parents.*

(Madam Nora)

Furthermore, I was informed that parents were considered less involved and affectionate towards their children. There were many cases of irresponsible parents who simply neglected their children's well being. As a result, students who came from lower socio economic backgrounds needed to earn money to support their families and, consequently, disregarded their studies. Madam Rohaya, Madam Nora and Madam Hamidah mentioned to me that these students lacked support and attention from parents who rather recklessly neglected their personal needs and well-beings.

*I had an experience during the disciplinary session when the client's father called his daughter using offensive terms such as "dumb, bastard, stupid, prostitute.*

*One of my Indian clients has been involved in truancy due to his family problems. He needed to take over the role of his father by working after school in the afternoon since his father does not work anymore. He works from 3 pm until 11.00 am or until early in the morning. Obviously he does not have time to do his homework.*

(Madam Rohaya)

*...most of them come from broken families, and we can see that they suffer from attention deficit.*

*... their parents are busy with their work and do not even bother about their children's well-being.. there was one case concerning an Indian client of mine who had a drunken father who also had three wives. Eventually, this boy had to work in order to support his family as he was deprived of sufficient food and clothing.*

(Madam Nora)

I was moved on hearing how badly the children of lower socio-economic background suffered from their family situations. I could picture their chaotic situations. They did not obtain enough guidance and support. Obviously, they had to carry dual roles. It was hard to juggle both roles, as they were still very young to bare such burdensome responsibilities. It was as if they were at a crossroad, not knowing which expectations to fulfil or which path to choose. On the left they needed to be at school, but on the right, they needed to fulfil their role as breadwinners of the family. I could sense that this situation might have an effect on their motivation levels as well as their socio emotional functioning. I could not imagine how they could stay focused on their studies, let alone bother about the existence of services in school, such as counselling service. These conditions would influence the students' emotional distress and the risk of developmental impairment and behavioural problems such as resentment and resistance. Hard work was needed by the counsellors to face the situation.

In similar vein, Madam Hamidah, Madam Asma and Madam Rohaya also expressed their dismay concerning the irresponsible parents who left it to the school to carry on the burden of nurturing their children's well-being.

*... there was a parent who came and scolded me asking why I couldn't take care and find their son whereabouts. They didn't understand their role. They just let the school take care of their children's well-being.*

*... only 30 parents turned up (during a parent-teacher meeting) although the school has 3,000 students.*

(Madam Hamidah)

*One more thing is that when the students were in trouble and sent for a counselling session, the parents expected an immediate effect...*

(Madam Asma)

Moreover they simply directed their criticism at the role of the teachers and counsellors at the school.

*They kept on blaming us, asking why we were conducting the meeting on Saturday morning not in the afternoon. However, when we tried to adjust it to the afternoon, they blamed us for taking away their precious times to relax. Things will never be right for them.*

(Madam Hamidah)

*There were parents who came to us and scolded us...enquired why teachers took their time. They even said to us don't you know that I have other kids to look after too!*

(Madam Rohaya)

Due to certain parental ignorance, the students' negative attitudes had become worst. They had no role models to follow. This resonated with the story of Madam Rose who illustrated the situation in which a student retaliated against her by asking her back about why she was busy meddling with his well-being. According to her, it was normal for this student to return home at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. Furthermore, his parents did not bother and never complained at all. Eloquently, she imitated what the student said to her:

*... why do you keep on asking me to do this and that, even my mom never asked me like what you do, come on teacher, we are living in a new era, teenage life is once in a lifetime. So enjoy life to the fullest.*

*Although I tried to advise him, he kept on advising me back. I told him that he could repent although he committed many big sins in life. To my surprise, he said teacher, I am really sure that I will be in hell.*

Personally I was quite confounded by this chaotic scenario. Recalcitrant and irresponsible parents thought wrongly about the role of teachers and counsellors in that school. They had also lost their sense of respect. This really was an unacceptable experience. I found this situation totally different than before, particularly in the way I was brought up. In Malay culture, teachers were considered as worthy of utmost respect. They were not only respected by parents, they were also granted the authority to punish children if they behaved wrongly. Traditionally, parents used to permit teachers to punish their children by saying *please punish our kids with cane or stick if they commit wrongly; just make sure they do not become blind and lose their limb*. Hence, it was not unusual for students to receive a public caning or verbal reprimand by teachers. Teachers also made regular visits to the village or selected houses just to meet up with the parents to notify them about their children's wellbeing at school, and convey advice or support if needed. I still remember how I was so terrified to see my teacher's car parked in front of my house one day. I thought at that time I must have made mistakes in school although my intuition suggested otherwise. To my surprise, the teacher came to invite my father for a small gathering who, unknown to me, was his former schoolmate. I was so relieved to know the actual situation; otherwise it would have caused me endless worry.

According to the counsellors, the deterioration of the parent-children relationships made students switch their attention to their friends. Students regarded friends as their source of reference and enjoyment. Almost all counsellors considered that the peer group was the greatest supporter for students' negative behaviour. This situation would obviously present a great challenge to counselling services as students found other support for their actions. They would simply retain the ill behaviour and seek their friends' approval as they considered them as their overt and perverse incentives. This situation would inevitably lead to an endless cycle of negative behaviour among them.

*I think the biggest influence in their lives is peer pressure. At first, they agree to change their attitudes during the session, but once they meet their friends outside, they cannot resist the temptations.*

(Madam Nora)

*I think they are adamant to do whatever they want whenever their friends are around.*

(Madam Asma)

*They play truant, disturb others, and try to persuade other friends to join their activities. One of the students said to me, teacher, if others can do that (play truant) I don't see any reason why I cannot join them.*

(Madam Fara)

From the stories presented, counsellors were facing great challenges. There was a mismatch of interests and expectations of students towards school. At the same time, the counsellors needed to confront parents who had such dysfunctional roles. There was no sense of connectedness and relatedness towards the school by either group. Although the counsellors played their role enthusiastically, they ended up being undervalued.

### **“Travelling a rocky road”**

*Why did they (school counsellors) ask you to go (counselling room)? Please listen to me. Don't go there, whoever asks you to go. Don't go there.*

*Why did you go for counselling? It is not meant for you. It is only for a dumb person.*

(Madam Rohaya)

*One female Indian student told me about her teachers' reaction upon hearing that she wanted to go for counselling. The teacher said to her please tell me why you want to see the counsellor, why don't you just see me? She is neither*



*your relative nor your family member, she does not even provide you with food, and she does not come from the same religious background or racial group like you.*

(Madam Rose)

### **“Besieged on all fronts”**

These were among the scenarios of the school community’s acceptance of counselling rendered by the school counsellors. The difficulties encountered by school counsellors in terms of students and their families appeared to be compounded by the lack of support from teachers and administrative colleagues. As a counsellor educator, I was frustrated that counselling had been stigmatised so badly. I thought that negative perceptions towards counselling only lingered amongst the school pupils. Here I was also experiencing the stigma, from the teachers and school administrators. Besides saying that counselling was only for those who were dumb, the students’ attitudes towards counselling were also threatened by the so called racism issue. I could sense that most of the teachers and school community failed to understand the role and status of counsellors. For me it was an indication of stigma and negative labelling surrounding the services.

### **“In need of personal and professional satisfaction”**

All counsellors collectively admitted that being a counsellor in this school entailed many challenges. Although they were recognised as an important group at the Ministry level, their role and function in this school still remained vague and ambiguous.

At times, the counsellors themselves were quite puzzled about their actual roles. They had to be ‘all-rounders in this school. At times they were assigned immediate tasks that were perceived by others as fitting into their roles. They were clearly torn between their responsibilities and the demands and expectations of others. They expressed their dilemma in this way:

*...lots of ad hoc activities need to be done... Sometimes we have conflicts with teachers who are always criticising our activities that clash with their times. We really don't have any choice as we were ordered by the school administrators to handle one programme in the main hall for students who failed to collect their report cards...*

(Madam Hamidah and Madam Asma)

As a researcher, I observed that the school counsellors' times were fully occupied. Counsellors in the morning session started their work at 7.30 am and ended at 2.30 pm while those who were in the afternoon session started at 12.00 until 6.45 pm. It was totally different from the school teachers who had their specific timetables. Although their workloads were more or less quite similar to each other (25 hours per week for teachers and 24 hours for school counsellors), they needed to perform various duties. They were required to conduct approximately 2 hours of individual sessions per day (9 hours per week – 2 hours daily except for 1 hour in Friday), 1 hour of group counselling in 3 alternate days (3 groups counselling/ 3 hours per week), 2 hours per week for administrative meeting or counselling programmes. At the same time, they still needed to conduct relief classes (2 hours daily / 10 hours per week) to substitute other teachers who were on leaves, or had duties outside school on a particular day or time.

When I analysed their workload, I found that most of school counsellors' time were dominated by conducting relief classes with the least time for conducting group counselling and counselling programmes. These relief classes obviously took up a big amount of their time (approximately 40 per cent of their total working hours). Although these relief classes could provide a considerable chance for school counsellors to approach larger group of students, they admitted encountering a conflict of interests among students who did not expect guidance and lesson would be provided during this hour. Indeed, it was totally different from other secondary school that I visited during my previous attachment as a counsellor educator. I found that the counsellors did not encounter any problems pertaining to relief classes, as the school administrators had already allocated them with two periods per week, exclusively for conducting guidance activities with students in their classrooms.

Additionally counsellors were also required to conduct five compulsory programmes during the school term. These involved conducting focused counselling programmes, peer counselling programme, orientation programme and Guidance and Counselling Club. All of these programmes were tailored by the Ministry of Education to promote human capital development among students. This was stated in the official guideline book for the implementation of guidance and counselling services in primary and secondary school as well as circular letters from the Ministry of Education Malaysia.

However, these counsellors' workload and tasks did not seem to impress most of the teachers as they kept questioning the counsellors' time. I still recalled Madam Rohaya's emotional confession during the unit's meeting. She was bitterly upset with one teacher who accused her of having considerable free time. It was considered a painful experience for her, as she was involved in a confrontation in front of other teachers who were having their lunch in the school canteen. It was a disgrace to receive such unsolicited criticism from a fellow teacher. Obviously, she had been victimised. She felt that the existence of the counsellors in this school was meaningless and, furthermore, other teachers kept on questioning and doubting the counsellors' professionalism and credentials.

Due to the teachers and administrators' sense of ignorance of counsellors' roles and responsibilities, a few counsellors reported on becoming their prey. There was no sense of understanding and respect concerning their roles and responsibilities. No cooperation was given to them. Teachers did not bother to offer a helping hand as they perceived it was not part of their duties.

*They (teachers) think our role is simple and easy compared to their jobs. In fact they argued that their role is even tougher as they need to teach students.*

(Madam Asma)

*... they don't realise how busy we are when we have to handle counselling programmes. We don't even have time to eat. Some teachers just ignored us even though they were ordered by the head teacher to help us handle the students in the hall. Can you imagine how chaotic the situation was when only four or five*

*of us had to handle 400 students in the big hall? The situation became worse when the students started to create a lot of noise. To make matters worse, one of the teachers noticed the situation and started blaming us for not having the skills to handle the students.*

(Madam Rose)

There was no indication of an understanding of counselling amongst teachers. Madam Nora lamented:

*The saddest thing is that the teachers took the opportunity to be in their rooms when we were really in need of their cooperation to handle students in the hall. Out of six classes, only one teacher committed to helping us. Nobody wanted to shift themselves from the comfort zone.*

She added:

*We cannot do anything as we are considered powerless here. If we give excessive orders to teachers, I think they will point back at us saying who we are we? We are not even at the top management of the school.*

Madam Fara, for example expressed her disappointment about the negative treatment received from the disciplinary unit. According to her this unit was supposed to work hand in hand with the counsellors in handling students' attitude. Unfortunately the way they acted was different. Rather than working together with them as a team, the pertinent administrator regarded their role negatively. In her own words, Madam Fara explained why the disciplinary unit acted that way.

*... they always reiterate how badly we manage the students' conduct. They don't really understand that the changes in behaviour are unpredictable and could take a long time before seeing the effect.*

She further illustrated by saying:

*I still remember that there were times when we didn't have any referred clients at all. We then discovered it was because of the action taken by the head of the discipline teacher at that time who didn't believe in counselling. He questioned why the students should be sent to counselling as he could not see any changes at all. He behaved that way without referring to the procedure set up by the Ministry of Education, which requires that every single student who is to be suspended from school be sent to the counselling unit before any disciplinary action is taken. Reports of students' behaviour will be considered as proof of their behavioural changes if any. When he realized this matter, immediately he sent the students to be counselled. The funny thing was, besides ordering us to do the session, he also asked us to send the report simultaneously on the day the meeting was held. This still happens.*

Madam Nora also appeared to be in the same predicament. As the head of the school counsellors for almost two years, she reported that there was a big gap in terms of treatment and recognition received, which was totally contradictory with the circular prescribed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia regarding the counsellors' position, compared to her former place in her previous school, in which the status of counsellors was highly regarded. According to the abovementioned circular, the position of counsellors in every secondary school should be placed after the school principal in the school's hierarchical organization. When I reflected my experience during school counselling attachment a few years back, I found this situation was totally different. I still remember that the position of school counsellor was recognised by the school community. During the school assembly, the counsellor was given a chance by the school principal to promote the service to all students. However, in this school, I was experiencing exactly the opposite situation. There was little promotion of the service and it was rarely being promoted during school assemblies. The only thing that I could remember was a few announcements regarding the school rules and regulations.

Expressively, Madam Nora elaborated her story:

*I came here in 2007 and I was not clear of my status as a counsellor. I considered myself as an experienced counsellor as I had been involved in various school*

*programmes for many years. Unfortunately, I had difficulties in understanding the counselling management here as I was unaware of many things. Sometimes we tend to make our own assumptions and act accordingly. When we (counsellors) attend meetings outside, many counsellors express their surprise with the large number of counsellors at this school, they even said that it must be great. For me, we could be a force if there was a sense of unity in the school community. Anyway, there is nothing to do as we have been neglected. I could remember the time when we wanted to conduct a big programme, there was no meeting being held, no committees except us. The thing that we always do is display the flyers in the notice board as well as in the teachers' room to let the school community know that we are going to conduct a certain programme.*

Madam Nora admitted that they had made considerable effort to expose the school administrator and teachers to the actual role of counselling. However, she found that nothing materialised.

As a senior counsellor, Madam Rose was not excluded from receiving the same treatment from the school administrator. Vividly, she recalled her previous counselling experience six years ago. She admitted that she suffered from negative treatment and bias from them. Every day, she needed to juggle her double roles. She had to be a teacher and at the same time fulfil her responsibility as a full time counsellor.

*At that time, it was in 2003. There were around 3000 students in this school. We had to cater for so many relief classes, in the morning and afternoon. I still remember I was given six relief classes in a day. And I said to myself it is better for me to be a normal teacher instead of having double roles like this. At that time, it was just two of us, and we needed to cater for a lot of counselling sessions along with many relief classes. Can you imagine with a number of students to be entertained... it was really stressful. Moreover, they did not give us flexible times. Instead, they continuously observed us, to see whether or not we performed the duties.*

There were times when she and a few other colleagues became victims of fraudulent accusations from them. Articulately, she recounted the stories:

*Discipline teachers also like to pick on me. One day I had taught Muslim students about the danger of being alcoholics. Unfortunately, one of the students in my class was caught consuming alcohol. He then manipulated the facts that I had taught him how to drink. The teacher then believed this student, and I was accused of teaching him to drink.*

There was one incident in which she was absurdly humiliated. To make matters worse, it was done right in front of students.

*... at that time I still remember the head of the discipline unit always come here to do the spot check. In front of my eyes, she chased the clients away from the counselling unit saying that they had been here too many times. At that time I was stunned, I just calmed myself down and said to her, well let us check the file together to clarify this matter. I discovered that this was the first time one of the clients was attending, while for the other one it was their second time. However, she refused to accept the fact and urged the students to go back to their classroom.*

Madam Rose also regarded that their existence in this school was considered worthless. They were treated like minor educators.

*There is no promotion at all of counselling to students. The counselling service is not mentioned at all during the school assembly.*

*I think we are facing the issue of bureaucracy from the school administrators. We always feel unhappy about conducting the programme. Most of our paperwork is repeatedly rejected by them. As a result, we tend to get fed up with the situation.*

From the stories presented, I could see that guidance and counselling services was in a critical situation. I could feel how powerless the counsellors were in the school community. They were not only being neglected by students, but were being treated badly by the teachers and school administrators. They were denied their rights. They had to stand on their own two feet. I contemplated on the reasons for such a predicament. The counsellors could be symbolised as facing a great battle in which they were facing threats from all angles. They seemed defenceless. They had to endure the

pain and sustain their work alone. They were in dire need of support to gain access to clients through referrals made by teachers. At the same time, they longed for assistance and recognition from the school community.

**“It is not the end, it is just the beginning”**

*As I was sitting on the red sofa watching the pupils going in and out from the unit, I saw one Indian girl known as Prema standing in the unit's corridor. She seemed to be patiently waiting for someone. She did not want to go inside the unit. After a few minutes, I could see her face glow upon seeing Madam Nora who had just come back from a short course outside school. Both were very pleased upon seeing each other. Immediately Madam Nora hugged Prema and both engaged in a friendly conversation. A few minutes later, I saw the girl join Madam Nora in her room without hesitation. They seemed very close to each other.*

Field notes: 25 August 2009

Vividly recalling the time I had observed this incident. I remembered it was a fine morning in the final week of August 2009. By this time, I had conducted several interviews and observations with students and managed to understand their views in relation to the school counselling services. In the midst of the frustrations regarding the negative stories and observed situations of students' and school community's acceptance of guidance and counselling services, I was surprised to discover the above scenario. Despite being showered by hatred and negative perceptions of teachers and students, the school counsellors still embraced their own followers.

From the interviews and informal conversations with school counsellors, I discovered that almost all of them had unofficially adopted daughters or sons who formerly were their referred clients. The most noticeable student was Prema, a 17-year old Indian girl who was previously a client of Madam Nora. According to Madam Nora, Prema was



her client at the age of 13, as she was referred by her teacher due to her disruptive attitude in the classroom. After having several sessions, she finally discovered that Prema had experienced a terrible family problem. She was a victim of mental torture by her own family due to her physical appearance, which her family considered as being fat and ugly. At that time, Prema suffered with extremely low self-esteem. She was a vulnerable girl too. Slowly, after having several counselling sessions, she gained confidence and could stand on her own two feet. Now, she was one of the important members in the counselling club.

Madam Rosma also resonated this story on her own when she recalled her pleasant experience of having adopted students.

*I have many adopted students. One of them is a Malay boy who is considered an orphan. I first saw him isolating himself in the classroom. At the age of 14, he didn't know how to read and really had low self esteem. I then approached him and started to talk to him. I invited him to come to my room at any time he liked. After that he came and met me every day. After the fourth time of seeing me he started to build a trust with me and unhesitatingly shared his stories. He tried to be a friend with me and always came to my room before going back home in the evening. Now he has managed to further his studies at a public university in Malaysia.*

Even though Madam Rosma talked about stigma and the negative perception of counselling, it did not hamper her effort to bridge the gap with the students. I could see how honest she was when she conveyed this story. Her warm, humorous and friendliness had indeed made her approachable. Her sense of understanding the students' situation amazed me. I was impressed on how she built the initial rapport with this boy by informally treated him like a friend. Indeed, her approach was fruitful in bridging the gap with this student.

## **“Never let the spirit die”**

Despite facing obstacles and challenges in conducting the service, all counsellors were motivated and persevered to uphold the service. As I analysed the findings, I discerned that each and every counsellor had their own unique way of approaching students. All sorts of challenges that they encountered had made them more insightful to inculcate different ways of approaching students. They needed to work harder to obtain trust and a sense of understanding from the school community.

Madam Rohaya for example, reported that she worked relentlessly to ensure students of different racial backgrounds appreciated the existence of counselling.

*What I have been doing now is disseminating hand-outs and flyers to students by putting them in every student's hotspots like in the classroom, notice boards, and students' pathways. I would be very grateful, if 100 out of 3000 students could read these.*

In addition, she also attempted to learn Tamil and Mandarin Tamil and Mandarin with the aim of understanding Chinese and Indian students better. She illustrated that:

*... when I ask and greet them using their languages, they express their surprise and say, wow, we cannot cheat our counsellor because she understands our language.*

In a similar vein, Madam Nora also expressed her high spirit in negotiating her role. She mentioned that:

*I will always be grateful if I can bring a change to the students' lives. Even if only one out of a 1000 students could change I would be the most grateful person. This is because I believe that to bring about a change in behaviour is a really long process. Many of my former students still contact me, even now. So I can say that there are many students who still remember me... I don't really take into account if others don't really appreciate what we do now. For me relationship with students is the most important to me.”*

Mr Siva also emphasised his efforts to bridge the gap with students by making himself visible around the school compound. He illustrated:

*...//.. the next day after the counselling session, I make it my responsibility to meet them informally in the school canteen or anywhere else in the school. Although there is no physical touch, I can feel their sense of belonging was there. I believe they would feel that the teacher is still taking care of them even outside the sessions. That's what I feel. If they feel they want to play truant, they will think twice. That's why I think their values could be derived from teachers.*

In addition, he added that inculcating a sense of belonging to the service was more crucial than addressing the students' barriers in language and communication.

*There is a saying that the Chinese always keep things to themselves, but I don't believe it actually. I believe that if they feel accepted by us, they will come. Reasons such as language and communication are just an early barrier. I have two walk-in Chinese clients. I think barriers occur due to counsellors not the students.*

**"Hope is the last thing ever lost."**

Despite all the challenges and obstacles that the counsellors had to face, all school counsellors endlessly conveyed their hopes for receiving acceptance in the school community. According to them, great effort was needed to overcome all the negative clouds about counselling.

Madam Rohaya for example wished that counselling could be fully accepted as an integral entity that held its credibility. At the same time, she hoped that the counselling services could be delivered in a more therapeutic way.

*I want each counsellor to have their own room, with a therapeutic element. Unlike the one we have now, it is so messy; we can hear people screaming here and there. In that sense, I think students would feel comfortable if the room is quiet and serene, it will encourage them to come.*

In a similar vein, Madam Rose was hoping that all parties, especially school administrators and teachers would obtain a better understanding concerning the importance of counselling in the lives of students. Repeatedly, she stressed that a sense of understanding and cooperation from the school administrator were vital to restore the trust for the service.

*I think it would be better if there is a deeper understanding of counselling from the highest level (such as head teacher, school administrators, teachers and up to the ministry level). I am hoping that the stigma that portrays counselling as being for troubled students could be removed. I do hope that the negative perceptions among teachers can be eliminated. Of course this thing involves cooperation from the school administrators to disseminate this matter. We hope others could understand our roles as much as they do the discipline roles. They need to realise that there are various ways of educating students – both harsh and soft.*

Additionally, Madam Rose suggested that the counsellors should display certain approaches and develop appropriate characteristics that meet the needs of the students. Besides having firm attitudes, they needed to have flexible skills that could extend beyond the regular counsellor-student relationship. For instance, students needed to be treated like friends that have the right to be respected and understood as well. The most important thing according to her was acquiring a full understanding of their contextual knowledge and situation. All in all, the ability to handle the students skilfully is a prerequisite for success. She illustrated:

*We need to have a certain approach to deal with the students. If we ask them directly i.e. did you ever involve yourself in any sexual activities, they will say no, no matter what. However, when we pose certain questions that could trap them like if you happen to have intercourse, do you use any condom? In this case unconsciously he said sometimes I use it teacher. Then they automatically admit that they did that.*

*...We need to know current terms that students always use, for example, if students said they have been involved in Apache Sereng, it indicates that they have been involved in Mat Rempit (illegal street racing). If we do not know, they will make fun of us.*

Mr Siva was also optimistic about the future growth of guidance and counselling in this school. When asked whether he wanted to follow the current counselling situation, he replied:

*First month yes, I followed the flow, second month no; I started building my own way. I made myself leave the counselling room and be everywhere. I would like to see changes, and I believe that I am capable of building a new counselling culture in this school.*

*... There should be something done for excellent students, mediocre and also the underachievers.*

Obviously, he had not succumbed to the usual practice of using a room for conducting sessions, although I felt a little bit doubtful about such a claim. As a counsellor educator, I always tell my students about the importance of having therapeutic rooms to conduct the session. After looking at the scenario of this school, I agreed with him. I learned from him that counselling is more than mastering technical skills. It was more of a humanistic way of dealing with pupils.

Despite facing an insufficient and poor quality of school infrastructure, he also held a strong faith that this service could be promoted among the students and school community if there was a change in the way counselling was promoted and conducted. He was confident of raising the standard of the service despite facing difficulties and hindrances. His words were proven when I observed his dedication and perseverance in performing his duties. During my stay here, I hardly saw him locked away in the room. Instead, he made himself visible in the school compound doing his outreach programmes. He claimed that this approach was vital in bringing students' closer towards understanding the importance of counselling. Eloquently he framed his statements:

*... at this moment, my concern is for the students. I just want the students to know who I am in the school, and what they can gain from me.*

*As for me, counsellors should make themselves visible to the school, not only focus on those students in trouble. I believe that everybody is our client. There*

*should be something done for excellent students, medium ones and also the underachievers.*

*We should make the administrators understand our role not by showing how many counselling sessions we have conducted but by how many programmes we managed to carry out.*

Even though he was the only male Indian counsellor in this school, he refuted the notion that the existence of counsellors' from the same racial background could bridge the gap between students. According to him, the way counsellors positioned themselves in front of the students was considered more important than having counsellors from the same racial group.

*... I found Indian, Chinese and Malay students come to me without hesitation. Yesterday I met one Malay girl, and she came to me as a normal client. I have one Malay boy and a girl. I also have Chinese students. They came to me voluntarily; there is no barrier for them. I think it is just a process of how I present myself to them. When I am able to do so, it is a sign that they can accept me and share their problems.*

*I know they have accepted me well when they don't hesitate to come and sit with me. Chinese students also come and sit beside me. For me, they are all kids; all are the same regardless of Malay or Chinese because at the end of the day we are only human beings.*

Mr Siva also added that understanding students' contextual situation is essential particularly in dealing with troublesome students.

*... the only thing that I do in dealing with students from lower socio economic status is to talk to them about their future. Sometimes I had to lie to them saying that they will be suspended from school if they don't come here. I repeatedly say to them that I will help them if they first help themselves.*

In addition, he also emphasised the importance of conducting follow up sessions with clients. Furthermore, he believed the importance of consistently inculcating a sense of attachment and connectedness with the clients.

*What I have done in the three months is, after doing the counselling session, I will hunt for the boy, and I'll make sure it happens regardless of the location in the school. I believe when I do that, they will feel that there is someone who really cares for them.*

*I have started doing this from the ground level. Right now I have already had six students who I can say already understand what counselling is all about. When I conducted counselling sessions with them and did the follow up, they came without any hesitation. I'm treating them like a responsible friend because I believe that counselling is building a relationship that occurs over a long period. I regard students who come for counselling as part of human contact, not because they were forced to come for a session. I view it as a flexible process.*

As his former lecturer, certainly he made me proud. His determination and conviction in restoring the students' faith in the service impressed me. He had a strong belief that approaching students from the ground level could bring them back to the service. There should be an understanding between the students and the counsellor. According to him students also needed to be cared for, understood and respected. Only then could they restore their sense of belonging towards the school system.

There will always be room for improvement in school counselling services. As Mr Siva said, counsellors still lack unity, and are lost in their approach to win the hearts of the school community. There should be a proper delegation in terms of the counsellors' workloads and programme allocation. Most importantly they should remain strong to uphold the service.

As a counsellor educator, I was grateful about entering the field and experiencing the real situation of counselling services. I have learnt that mere theoretical knowledge is not sufficient to address the needs of the students. They need to be understood in their own contextual situation. A mutual understanding between the students, school counsellors and school community is vital to restore their sense of belonging towards the service. In the next chapters, I would like to glance through the lens of the teachers and administrators' towards counselling. What made them react and perceive counselling negatively? It seemed that everyone was in agreement; they abhorred the services, and made sarcastic remarks concerning counselling. Was that only due to the counsellors?



## **CHAPTER 8**

### **SCHOOLTEACHERS' STORIES**

#### **“School community’s deteriorating climate”**

##### **Introduction**

When I began this research, I viewed counselling as an independent field. I believed that the knowledge obtained from students and school counsellors was sufficient to answer my research questions. However, I could not stop myself from thinking about the issues raised by students and school counsellors. During the interview sessions, I was bombarded with many stories about teachers’ negative perception of counselling from self-referred students and those not involved in counselling. Similarly, I was overwhelmed by the comments of counsellors regarding the negative attitudes of teachers and school administrators towards counselling. Listening to their stories made me wonder what was actually happening in the school community. Why did teachers react negatively towards counselling? Why was there less cooperation given to counsellors? I was drawn to seek these answers from teachers and administrators.

The present chapter is the third of five chapters, and sets out my fieldwork in a narrative style. It depicts my interview experiences, observations and casual conversations conducted with the schoolteachers. Listening to their stories provided food for thought concerning important perspectives of counselling from the teachers’ point of view. In previous studies of school counselling, the possibility of other significant perspectives within the school community was the area that I had always ignored or even overlooked. The inclusion of these accounts indicates how far this research has taken me on a journey of confronting, challenging and transforming my beliefs about the situation surrounding school counselling practices. As I reflected on their stories of how they perceived counselling, the underlying issues relating to the school culture and their current teaching practices unfolded.

### **“Battling the resistance”**

*It was late morning in the final week of July when I decided to approach schoolteachers for an interview session. It was not difficult to find the teachers' room as it was located on the ground floor of the main building adjacent to the administrative office. The room was also next to the discipline unit. There were two separate doors leading into the room; one was situated in front of the room while another was located at the back, connecting directly to the school canteen. As soon as I entered, I was surprised to see such a cramped teacher's room. It was packed with male and female teachers of different racial backgrounds. They had been provided with wooden tables and chairs, which were placed facing each other. To make my move from one teacher to another, I needed to pass through narrow pathways between their tables. I saw ten teachers who were busy with their tasks. A few of them were preparing for their teaching while a few others had just finished their classes. A few teachers busily engaged in conversation just ignored my presence. I stood around awkwardly, not quite knowing what to do with myself. As I was walking around, I kept showering them with my polite smile and warm 'selamat pagi' (a 'good morning' greeting in the Malay language) with the hope of building an initial rapport. I did not identify any particular teacher to be interviewed as I wanted to interact with them randomly in order to obtain their understanding of counselling. Besides, I wanted to open up the possibility of getting to know the teachers myself. Slowly, I walked around. No one attempted to greet me. Now I slowly felt a shiver run up my spine. I should feel happy with my plan, but I am no longer quite so. If the situation persists, I might end up with no interviews today. Sigh. I have no one to blame but myself. I was not close to any of the teachers as I rarely came into their room. I had been so focused on my task with the students and school counsellors in the counselling room upstairs. So I felt that it served me right! Indeed, I felt like a stranger visiting them. As I was in the midst of nowhere, I tried to approach two Chinese teachers. Sadly, they refused to be interviewed and made excuses, most notably*

*having packed timetables. At that moment I knew for sure they would not do the interview with me. Nevertheless, I was not discouraged by this situation and tried to approach other teachers. As I walked amongst them, my eyes made contact with one female Malay teacher who had a welcoming face. I was praying that she would give me hope and agree to be interviewed. Slowly I approached her and introduced myself. I explained my intention as well as seeking her permission to be interviewed. I could sense her reluctance from her tone of voice. Her excuse of time constraints frustrated me. After giving several explanations, she accepted my request and agreed to an interview the following day. I was intensely relieved as soon as I acquired her participation. These experiences made me believe that I was being viewed as more than just an outsider.*

Field notes: 28th July 2009

This entry reminded me of my sense of awkwardness when I tried to approach schoolteachers for an interview. I admit that it was not easy to persuade them to share their opinions and views pertaining to school guidance and counselling services. I understood that their hesitation was partly due to insufficient rapport having been established between us. I had spent less time mingling with them, as I had dedicated much of my time to the pupils and school counsellors in the counselling unit. However, I also noticed that they were very busy with their teaching tasks, which I found difficult to fit in with my times of availability. Nevertheless, this encounter made me more aware of the issue of power relations and rapport with other parties in the school community. I needed to improve my interpersonal skills and be more open and flexible with them before attempting to conduct any interview sessions. My awkwardness was, however, to some extent relieved on seeing the teachers Madam Nur and Madam Kamala.

**Madam Nur's story**  
**"They do not serve us well"**

I was fortunate enough to obtain approval for an interview from this teacher, whom I named Madam Nur. Despite her hesitation at our initial encounter, she finally agreed, as she could find free time for about half an hour on the following day. As promised, I met her on one fine morning at 10.15 am. I considered her an experienced teacher, as she had been teaching Islamic Education (exclusively for Malay students) in this school for the past nine years.

Dressed neatly in her brown '*baju kurung*' (Malay traditional dress), with matching brown '*tudung*' or head scarf, she appeared bold and expressive. This was further evidenced when she confidently conveyed her views during the interview as well as in her teaching practice in the classroom. I had once observed her teaching in the classroom, which was situated just beside the counselling unit. She appeared very enthusiastic in her teaching and frequently provided personal coaching to students at the end of the lesson. As a senior teacher in her early 40's, she was considered firm in giving her opinion and brave in voicing her dissatisfaction. She spoke candidly about what she felt about counselling.

Truthfully, she admitted that she did not clearly see the function of counselling in the school. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the way the school counsellors conducted their duties. She repeatedly claimed that counsellors mostly concentrated their time on handling individual sessions rather than on conducting a wider programme with the students. This approach, according to her, was not effective in addressing the needs of the students in a school with a high number of students. Moreover, she claimed that the counselling services were not completely approachable or available to all students. The programme seemed only to serve a particular group of students, notably those who were emotionally troubled or in trouble for wrongdoings. She responded:

*I don't see much of their [counsellors'] roles here. They like to call them (the students) personally rather than reach them in a mass group, which I think is not that effective. Personally, I think they should concentrate on other students in a larger group as well. In addition they should conduct it on a regular basis.*

*... even though they always mention that counselling is open to all students; I only see the troubled group becoming the regular attendees.*

I sensed that she expressed her concern with the effectiveness of school counselling services for different types of students as she was aware of the high number of students of different classes and backgrounds.

Moreover, she boldly claimed that counsellors were just providing the students with regular activities such as individual sessions and study skill's programmes. Besides serving uninteresting programmes, there was no effect of the counselling programmes being acknowledged by her at all. She disclosed:

*... the only programme that I have seen organised by them so far is study skills. That is usually the only programme organised by them. Besides, they have also set up orientation programmes for Forms Four and Upper Six.*

These two programmes (study skills and orientation programmes) were the only programmes that she had seen. These were considered to be among the five compulsory programmes required by the ministry to be conducted by counsellors in every secondary school.

She recounted her dissatisfaction:

*I don't really see their function. Other teachers also said the same thing. Instead of calling 2-3 students, I think they should cover the needs of all. Besides, having no class, they really have ample time as they can go for their lunch at the school canteen at any time they like.*

I could sense from her sceptical smile that she considered that school counsellors were under-employed. It reminded me of the outcry made by Madam Rohaya regarding one of the teacher's accusations that counsellors' have ample free time. This situation suggested that the counsellors' professionalism was being questioned by the school community. They did not completely see the role, let alone comprehend the effect of counselling services on the students and school community. The counsellors' role was clouded by negative perceptions.

Her dissatisfaction with counselling services was further exhibited when she asserted that counselling programmes clearly did not meet the needs of teachers. She described teachers' experiences of attending development courses organised by the counselling unit. These were annual programmes provided by the school administration to enhance teachers' development and teaching professionalism. Sadly, she claimed that the content of the programme was not interesting at all, as it was not contextually tailored according to the teachers' needs. She pointed out that the teachers craved a creative approach, involving approaches such as simulations and role play, rather than listening to the counsellors' lecture for hours. She was not making a superficial claim; rather, she was commenting on her observations of the situation over many years. There had been no improvement or attempts to upgrade the contents of the programme. She revealed:

*I didn't enjoy the staff development programme organised by the counselling unit. I do not think it was an effective programme at all as I couldn't get any benefit from it. The information given was not something new and it was not a worthy programme to join.*

This lack of improvement ignored views expressed by teachers.

*There is no step taken to improve the quality of the programme. Although teachers were given the opportunity to offer their comments, no further improvement was undertaken.*

As a teacher, she expected to receive new information concerning practical skills that could improve her teaching practice and, hence, bridge the gap with the students. However, she was left feeling frustrated as the contents of the programme did not meet her current expectations. These statements provided me with an indication that the counsellors were less than effective in providing an effective service to the wider school community. Her views appeared to be based on repeated experience and carefully considered observations.

As a teacher, she suggested improvements for the approaches and the contents of the counselling programme. Counsellors' services should be clearly communicated to the school community. Besides concentrating on theoretical knowledge, which mostly originated from Western countries, she suggested that counsellors could wisely blend this knowledge with the contextual knowledge, particularly on the current issues being

experienced by teachers in this school. In addition, she proposed inculcating religious values in students' lives, especially among Malay students, as she taught them Islamic Education. Hence, she believes that considering the local needs of the school community is of paramount importance.

Additionally, she suggested that all students, irrespective whether under achievers or high achievers, should be given a chance to gain equal benefit from the service. She proposed that counsellors conduct a wider programme to suit the needs of a larger group of students rather than just approaching them individually.

*I think counsellors should play their roles effectively. They should cover the needs of all students and shouldn't confine them to troublesome students only. Besides, they should organise programmes regularly, and not just concentrate them occasionally (based on a certain period of schooling such as the early months). Sometimes brilliant students are also in need of motivation as they also tend to misbehave towards teachers.*

*Counselling programmes have to be tailored according to the needs of the schoolteachers. For example, they need to teach us practical skills to approach students. In order to improve the counselling programme, they should include lots of simulations or role plays.*

However, she did admit that the counsellors were facing many obstacles due to the high number of students. She acknowledged that counsellors were under pressure to prioritise troublesome students rather than concentrating on the well-being of the well-behaved students.

*I do understand and admit that the large number of students is beyond the counsellors' control. Furthermore, they need to give priority to the neediest students rather than concentrate on non-threatening cases.*

Indeed, she provided me with a detailed picture of the school counselling situation and offered insights into the counselling services from her point of view. Although I did not have much time to conduct my interview with her, the views and suggestions given were helpful in opening up another perspective on the counselling service.

**Madam Kamala's story**  
**"It's too hot to handle"**

My encounter with Madam Kamala, a female Indian teacher, happened opportunistically. As soon as I had finished my interview session with Madam Nur, I decided to go back to the counselling unit. On my way to the front door, I saw one teacher diligently marking students' exercise books, which were stacked neatly in front of her. She seemed different to the other teachers. She did not involve herself in conversations like others did during their free time. Instead, she sat silently doing her work. She seemed to be dedicated to carrying out her duties. I was impressed by the way she presented herself. I wanted to discover her world views of being a teacher in this school as well as her opinion of counselling services. My curiosity encouraged me to approach her. I summoned up my courage to greet her and subsequently introduced myself. I was surprised to notice that she was a friendly woman as she greeted me with a warm and welcoming smile at our initial encounter. I immediately introduced myself as a researcher who wanted to learn about the school counselling situation from her. At that stage, I tried to be as humble as possible. I knew it was very hard for me to obtain the trust of schoolteachers, especially when I was an outsider. Surprisingly, she responded politely to my request and did not hesitate to welcome me to sit down opposite her. I would have liked to conduct an interview in a more private place, but I realised her hectic timetable would not permit me to do so.

She was dressed nicely in maroon traditional Indian attire known as Punjabi dress, formal attire for Indian women at school or in the Malaysian government sector. In addition, she had a red *dot* (a small red round mark) on her forehead, an indication that she was a married Hindu. I experienced her as a motherly type. Although we were different in terms of racial backgrounds, I could feel how warmly she was in treating me. She spoke gently and directly to me.

In person, I experienced her as a dedicated and responsible teacher. This was evident when she mentioned arriving at school every day at 6.30 am, an hour earlier than the official school opening time. As an experienced teacher, with 30 years experience, and having in this school for five years, she appeared to be well versed in the students' attitudes and behaviours. She indicated that she was not merely conveying her



knowledge acquired exclusively through teaching. In fact, she also tried to educate students by all means available to her. During the conversation, she informed me that she would give the students immediate advice and respond within her capacity if she noticed any bad behaviour committed by them. She felt responsible for guiding students not only in how to excel academically but also to behave appropriately. She took a broad view of students' development.

As a teacher in her late 40s, she was not only teaching students but also actively nurturing them. She would react to the students' needs by giving them advice, or even refer them to the counsellor if she noticed them having problems. Her warm and caring attitude was apparent when she reported that students, both Chinese and Indian, came and hugged her when they met. In addition, they would not hesitate to disclose their problems to her as she taught Moral Education and Tamil language, which were exclusively intended for Chinese and Indian students (Malay students were required to attend Religious Education instead). Frankly, I could feel her kindness as well. She treated me as if she had known me for ages. She spoke fluently in the Malay language and was keen to share her knowledge and experience as a teacher. I could say that she was a teacher, who communicated personal warmth and wisdom.

When asked about her views of counselling, Madam Kamala expressed positive views. She commented that the role and function of counselling were basically good as it could help develop students' psychosocial and emotional well-being. She recognised that counsellors were skilful at dealing with students' attitudes. According to her, counsellors did their job successfully.

*I think counselling is good. All the counsellors are very good. They have motherly types of character. In addition, they do not get angry quickly with the students. Besides, they have ways of tackling students' problems by using their own step-by-step approach.*

*I have seen several counselling organised programmes such as motivational programmes, learning skills and outdoor activities.*

*I have a joint activity organised together with the counselling unit, for example, on this 31st July we will be having a trip to an old folks' home.*

*././.. besides they also provide an orientation programme for new upper six and form four students. They have fulfilled their roles successfully.*

I saw her as having a keen sense of awareness of what was happening within the school counselling situation. She could meticulously explain the various counselling programmes organised such as study skills, motivational programmes, orientation programmes as well as educational visits. She appreciated the role of counsellors and was willing to lend a helping hand to conduct certain programmes. She communicated to me that she had worked together with the counselling unit to organise a joint programme.

She acknowledged counsellors as experts who could handle students' behaviour successfully. In this way, she had full faith in counselling and accepted its role and importance. In fact, she worked hand in hand with counselling by playing an active role in referring students to the unit. She framed her experience in dealing with the counselling service:

*I came across a case of a student who had a problem with being sexually aroused. He had a problem to control his sexual arousal even with his mother. Upon hearing this from his friend, I immediately referred him to a counsellor.*

However, she admitted that she had only seen one group of students involved in counselling, those who had been involved in disciplinary problems. Students from other groups such as high achievers were rarely seen in the room. Counsellors' services roles were not widely available to all students. She revealed that:

*Students who go for counselling mostly have a lot of demerit points and have been involved in various disciplinary problems.*

Additionally, she admitted that counselling services had been bombarded with many obstacles, notably a negative perception from students and the school community. According to her, counselling services in this school were seen as having difficulties in their role as they could not extend their service boundary to meet the potential demand. Counsellors' roles were perceived as being unduly constricted. They only dealt with the

one type of student and handled broadly similar cases of disciplinary problems. They were far from reaching the optimum service as school counsellors.

*Guidance and counselling in this school only manage to perform their basic role. Their total success and effectiveness have still not been achieved.*

Her views were quite consistent with what I observed during my stay here. I rarely noticed counsellors handling tasks other than counselling referred students and conducting motivational programmes. They could not involve themselves in other students' development tasks, such as, for example, administering inventories, career exploration or personality tests. They had to prioritise and cater for students in difficulties, leaving the unharmed and untroubled students to manage themselves in their own way. This situation was apparent when I had a chance to conduct a guidance activity with a group of female Chinese students who were my former participants. They had expressed astonishment on learning that guidance and counselling actually served lots of functions such as career exploration, personality tests and many self-development inventories. After conducting these inventories, they were very excited when they managed to explore and discover their career preferences according to personality types. There was one Chinese girl known as Chu who clearly expressed her interest in venturing into psychology as her future career. Before this, she had doubted her career interest as she had limited knowledge of the career prospects and its pathway. After the guidance session with me, she seemed to be very excited and motivated to experience other inventories. I could also see that her friends, who were high achievers, were excited about discovering the chance to read the leaflets on educational and career information that had been placed on the shelf in a corner of the unit. I was happy that they could discover something that was previously unknown and unfamiliar to them. I observed that as they slowly became acquainted with what was available, they began to open themselves up to the potential of the service.

Throughout my conversation with Madam Kamala, I was bombarded with her challenging stories of being a teacher in this school. Although most of my questions were directed towards her views on counselling, I must say that half of her responses touched on the issues of school culture and students' poor behaviour. I understood that she was clearly upset with the high number of students and their worsening attitudes in

the school. She herself had witnessed students' deteriorating behaviour. Troublesome students were mostly those who had failed their examinations and had been involved in various social problems. Furthermore, the high number of troublesome students was considered a threat to the school community at large as they were increasingly becoming out of control.

*Those troublesome students mostly failed their examinations. They have been involved in lots of social problems.*

*Due to the high number of students, they take the opportunity to play truant because they believe that the teachers do not bother about their situation.*

*They become involved in truancy because they are not interested in studies.*

I could appreciate that there was a huge difference between being a teacher and being a lecturer like myself, as the former entailed immense challenges in dealing with young teenagers. They have to face different types of students ranging from high achievers, mediocre and underachievers who display different behaviours and characteristics. As a lecturer in higher education, I did not have any difficulty concerning students' behaviour, as I only had to deal with the high achievers who were focused and applied themselves without prompting. There were no challenges at all in terms of managing their behaviour, as they were considered mature and well-behaved. The only thing that I needed to take into consideration was upgrading my pedagogical skills and enhancing my knowledge to meet their needs. However, here in this school, I was listening to a rendition of students' negative attitudes and the difficulties endured by teachers facing such an awful situation. I could not imagine how I would be able to handle this situation calmly, if I were in their position.

As an advisor to one of the school Clubs, Madam Kamala mentioned how students downplayed and disregarded the importance of participating in school clubs.

*Students also dare not participate in extracurricular activities, although it is considered important for their enrolment in university...Although we have 100 members in this club, only ten to fifteen students manage to turn*

*up for the activities. Furthermore, they are reluctant to pay for the membership fee.*

Having listened to her story, it became clear how students undervalued the importance of school clubs. They did not see the significance of school clubs in respect of their self-development and their future prospects. Although there was a merit point given for participating in school clubs, which was considered an added value for college and university admission, students seemed underwhelmed by the concept. I still remember how precious my experience of being involved in a school club during my secondary school, 20 years ago, had been to me. Besides obtaining knowledge from classroom lessons, I could also acquire new information from joining extracurricular activities. I actively participated in a Home Science Club as I was interested in learning practical ways to manage household chores. I was exposed to various household management activities including cooking, planting, sewing as well as living skills. Indeed, these experiences helped me to develop my personality, enabling me to mingle with fellow friends and to learn how to establish psychosocial development accordingly. However, in this school, I was experiencing a contradictory situation. Students had their own way of fulfilling their interests.

According to Madam Kamala, besides having less interest in participating in school activities, students' negative behaviours were also triggered by peer influence, which she considered to be one of the key challenges faced by the school community.

*Students are also involved in truancy due to the influence of their peers.  
Usually this happens during the last period of their lessons.*

*...//.. Counselling will only convey it's effectiveness for a short period.  
Students will keep on repeating the same attitudes when they meet their  
friends in school.*

Indeed, she provided an important remark about the degree to which the challenge of peer pressure could threaten the survival of the counselling service in this school as it became increasingly troubled by the poor behaviour of the current students.

Her later statements about the behaviour of a few students startled me.

*I found that Indian students show many attitude problems. In addition, I have also been bullied by them. They keep on insulting me and calling me various names like fat woman, old granny, and mother in law.*

I was truly dumbfounded listening to her confession that she was bullied by her own students. Admittedly, it was not unusual for me to hear about bullying incidents among students. However, I was facing a much more serious concern about bullying where I was listening to the grievances from someone with the status and authority of a teacher who had been victimised by her own students. I could sense a dramatic change in students' behaviour. They seemed to have lost their respect and dared to display their defiant attitudes overtly before their teachers. Although she was endlessly extending her devotion towards educating students, a significant group seemed unappreciative towards her. Obviously, she felt disheartened by the situation.

On reflection, I began to appreciate the irony of her situation when she confessed that this school was the source of all sorts of immoral behaviours. She mentioned that students learned an array of bad things from school as they mixed with the troubled students. This school, according to her, was not a totally safe place anymore. It had been undermined by many negative influences.

Eloquently she described various attitude problems displayed by students.

*They have learnt almost everything, from browsing porno pictures up to how to commit vandalism.*

*...Chinese boys do not like to learn. They just love chatting and sleeping in the classroom. The worst part is that they don't want to get up even when I shout at them. Sometimes I am afraid that they might do something bad against me...Seriously, they are not 100 percent following the lesson...*

*...Students learn all sorts of bad things here, for example how to cheat.*

*...The troublesome students are mostly those with demerit points and who failed all their subjects in major examinations.*

*...//.. Usually students face psychosocial problems, like love matters. There is a case where a female student simply took off her shirt in front of her friends... there are also a few female students of Form Four and Five who have become call girls. Surely, those students are not fit to be here. I felt like crying when I faced this situation. Unfortunately the Ministry of Education still keeps them here.*

I contemplated these students' situations. Troublesome students were increasing their influence, like a dangerous disease, that could spread its negative influence and subsequently infect others. I could feel how upset and powerless Madam Kamala was in being confronted by such situations. It seemed to be an endless cycle for her, and the school community. She was constantly confronted by such situations and needed endless patience and perseverance to cope. She hoped that her voice could contribute to improving the situation.

Madam Kamala's story also reminded me of a similar situation experienced by another female Malay teacher who taught in the afternoon session. During our casual conversation with her, she reported that she could not stand facing the chaotic situations caused by students. She expressed her dismay at the attitude of students, particularly the Chinese, who displayed a sense of disrespect towards teachers. They would audaciously come in and out of the classroom during lessons without appearing guilty. They behaved as if there was no teacher in the classroom. According to her, students were not interested in studying at all. They were compelled to come to school as there was nobody to take care of them at home. Moreover, she reported that parents simply regarded school as a form of escapism from controlling and educating their children. In addition, Chinese boys tended to sleep in the classroom while the girls were busily occupying their time with their "salon and hairdressing activities". Moreover, she claimed that Indian students were more mischievous than Chinese students. She claimed that this chaotic situation in the classroom had undermined teachers' pedagogical skills as well as affected their sense of motivation. In an effort to curb students' poor behaviour, the teachers tended to ask students to copy all the words written on the whiteboard. Sometimes, the teachers came into the classroom just for the sake of controlling students' behaviour and had to all but forget about trying to teach students.

This account reminded me of another casual conversation with a female teacher who mentioned students' bad attitudes in the classroom. She reported that she needed to bring the key to lock the door's grill during classroom lessons to prevent them from leaving freely during the lesson, as she would end up teaching alone. I could deduce that this situation indicated that teachers seemed to be facing considerable levels of bad behaviour of students. They seemed powerless in their own environment and were facing a crisis of motivation and interest, which resulted in them allocating much of their time to controlling students' poor behaviour in the classroom.

The above experiences were not only endured by schoolteachers but also happened to me as well. I still remember the incident when I conducted guidance activities in one of the classrooms, in the middle of August 2009. Actually, I was covering for the school's head counsellor who had an important meeting outside school. I needed to conduct guidance activities for students of Form Three aged 15 and 16 years old. I was excited to be in the classroom and could not wait to understand them better. I thought it was a suitable time for me to deal directly with them. I was anticipating delivering my knowledge and could not wait to share my experience with them. In doing so, I had prepared myself with one guidance topic. I had planned beforehand to elaborate on the secret meaning of the acronym 'PELAJAR' (in English, 'student'). I had prepared myself an hour prior to the lesson to elaborate each of the letters which covers students' responsibilities towards learning in school. I anticipated describing all these letters one by one: 'P' refers to '*perancangan*' or planning, 'E' refers to '*emosi*' or emotional state of affairs, 'L' – *latihan berterusan* (continuous practice), 'A' - *agama* (religion), 'J' – *jujur* (honesty), 'A' – *azam* (motivation), 'R' – *rajin* (diligent).

When I entered the classroom, they were surprised to see me, as they thought I was a new teacher. There were approximately 40 students in the classroom, including students from different racial backgrounds. There were approximately thirty Indian students, six Chinese, and four Malay students. I noticed that three male Chinese students were sleeping while the rest of them were busily doing their work. Without further ado, I introduced myself and began to explain my objectives and plan for the lesson. For the first 15 minutes, they seemed interested to listen to what I was saying. Using a mind map, I had stated seven points on the white board about the secret meanings of the word 'PELAJAR'. I was very enthusiastic to provide them with motivation as I knew they



would be sitting for a major examination that year. I noticed that the Indian and Malay students seemed to be paying attention, and felt that I could deliver my first point successfully.

However, my passion was later disrupted as I wanted to move to the second point. Suddenly, an Indian boy began to show disruptive behaviour. He was very talkative. I noticed he changed his place three times and began to disturb my lesson. Moreover, he kept on asking nonsense questions that obviously made other students feel uneasy. I could not pretend to myself that I was not also disturbed by his behaviour. His disruptive attitude caused other students to also lose their attention. I was struggling to regain their focus. Indeed, I was like a clown trying hard to impress and capture their attention. The situation became even worse when two Malay boys simply left the classroom without my permission. When I asked them to come back, they did not protest. They just followed my instruction. Unfortunately, three Malay boys, who I believe were their friends from another classroom, came in without seeking my permission. Rudely, they started a conversation. I became angry and the whole class began to lose focus. I could not pursue the lesson. Instead, I calmed myself down and approached them. With great seriousness, I asked these students to leave the classroom and they followed my instruction. I later decided to approach them in order to have an informal conversation. It was immediately apparent that they did not want to learn and did not have any interest at all in learning and staying focussed. Indeed, I was frustrated with the situation. I started to understand why most of the teachers ignored a few students and kept on teaching the others who were interested in following the lesson.

I also stumbled on a similar situation reported by two Indian girls who voluntarily came to see me in early August. They wanted to have some guidance on how to stay focussed in the classroom as they were having difficulties due to their friends' rowdiness and uncontrolled classroom situation. They reported that their classmates, especially boys, did not respect the teachers at all. They felt sorry for most of the female teachers who needed to endure the students' poor behaviour. They were trying to identify ways to deal with their friends' disturbing behaviour and poor attitudes.

When asked about students' negative attitudes, however, Madam Kamala did not wholly blame students for what had happened. According to her, an improper school

environment was also contributing to this bad situation. A high number of students and the poor quality of the physical infrastructure had added to the deteriorating situation.

*Due to the high number of students, we cannot easily manage to control their attendance in the extracurricular activities.*

*Classrooms are not comfortable. For example, upper six students have been placed in the science lab and need to endure sitting in the tiny lab chairs.*

*...Our system has made the students even more mischievous.*

During our conversation, she reiterated her concerns about the number of students who she considered to be out of control many times. I was later shocked hearing her analogies about the current school situation. She framed them in these statements:

*Staying in this school is like living in a cow or goat shed. The situation cannot be controlled anymore... Seriously, the huge amount of students in this school is just like sardines in a can. The Ministry still accepts the failed students. That is why the school's situation is becoming worse.*

*...This school is so boring because of its system.*

According to her, the only way to solve the problem was by having a smaller number of students. This would reduce the teachers' burden as they would then be able to establish a close relationship with students and address their needs appropriately.

*The most important thing is the role of the Ministry of Education. This school should have two head teachers instead of one. The same situation also applies to the teachers. In this school, one teacher needs to carry double roles, which are completely different compared to teachers in other schools.*

*Students will only show their good behaviour if we can bring ourselves closer to them.*

I could see the loop of ill behaviour being displayed by the school community. This was apparent when Madam Kamala commented on the attitudes of a few teachers who took

their teaching career for granted. Teachers started to deviate from their responsibilities and failed to perform their roles wholeheartedly.

*.../.. unfortunately, I found that most of the teachers do not perform their roles appropriately. They simply hang around chatting and take their jobs for granted. The sense of honesty is not there. They are not fit to be teachers. When I tried to advise them, they reacted angrily towards me.*

*.../..One of the causes why students tend to play truant is because of the teachers themselves. They have problems in teaching skills and failed to address students' behaviour appropriately.*

*.../..In addition teachers also displayed reckless characteristics when it comes to teaching students. They take their teaching duties for granted. There are a few teachers who take the opportunity to have extra leave or dare to seek fake medical leave certificates.*

I was not surprised listening to these stories as I discerned that most of the schoolteachers found these situations unbearable. They seemed to have come to the extreme limit of living with the situation. As a result, they would look for opportunities for flight rather than fight.

When asked about practical ways to solve this matter, Madam Kamala strongly suggested a revamp of the school system. She claimed that there must be a significant role played by the Ministry of Education to address these issues, otherwise the situation could threaten the entire school system.

Time flew very fast during my conversation with Madam Kamala. I did not realise the time spent until I heard the sound of the school bell. It was also an indication that 45 minutes of classroom lessons had ended. I was grateful for meeting her as I had developed a fuller picture of the school situation from her macro and micro-lens viewpoint.

Indeed, listening to these teachers' stories gave me new insights into counselling from their perspective. Despite having initial reservations about obtaining their participation, I was left feeling satisfied at the end of the interview sessions as I found their perspectives were fruitful in providing insight and understanding of the current school

counselling situation. Although they were outsiders to the counselling profession, their insider views about counselling amazed me. I discerned that they did not ignore the counsellors' role but were concerned about the effectiveness of the service. At the same time, they managed to provide an insight and understanding into how the school cultural system contributed to students' deteriorating values. These provided a holistic understanding of how these situations affected the school counselling services. Therefore, my next chapter, which is also the final chapter of my fieldwork journey, will illustrate my experience of meeting and talking to the school administrators in an attempt to understand how counselling and the school situation are perceived through their lenses.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' STORIES**

#### **“Reformation of faith: It’s a mutual effort”**

My journey has reached the final part of my data presentation. I intend concluding this chapter with the presentation of the school administrators’ collective stories. As mentioned in Chapter Eight, the idea of interviewing them was not initially included in my research plans, as I did not anticipate that their views would influence the research findings directly. However, as I went through the research process, I learnt that in order to grasp a holistic understanding of the school counselling situation, the voices of the school community should be taken into account. Apart from the teachers’ stories, school administrators’ voices were essential, as they would provide both a macro and micro understanding of the school counselling situation, as well as of the school system as a whole.

#### **“It’s a roller coaster ride”**

Interviewing and mingling with the school administrators was not always smooth sailing for me. I needed to cut through red tape before obtaining their participation. It took me several weeks to achieve a complete interview with them. There were mixed reactions upon knowing my position as a researcher. Although I was granted permission to conduct my study here, the responses varied.

In my initial encounter during the second week in the school, they would ignore me when I started to introduce myself as a researcher. I guessed it might be too abrupt for them to feel comfortable in offering their cooperation. A few administrators explicitly showed their reluctance upon receiving my request. I still remember that I had requested to attend the joint meeting between the counselling and the discipline units, as I was eager to learn and understand the procedure of handling the cases of troublesome students. However, one of the administrators politely rejected my permission, as he insisted that the information was confidential and was not to be disclosed to outsiders. I

understood and respected his stance, as he did not want to pursue the issue out with the involved parties. In addition, during the initial encounter with them, a few of them thought that I was a teacher-trainee as my appearance and my petite physique resembled an undergraduate university student.

I still remember an incident upon entering a classroom one afternoon. I was having a casual conversation with a group of Indian boys when a female administrator came into the room. With a stern look, she immediately posed the question, "Are you a teacher-trainee here?" I replied, "No, I am a researcher here." Then she asked, "Do you have a permission to be here?" I replied, "Yes." I was not surprised to be asked that question as I acknowledged that not all the school administrators recognised my presence as a researcher in the school. I could not blame them as there were many teacher-trainees doing their placements in this school at that time. Admittedly, as an outsider, I was not fully engaged with them as they had rarely seen me in the office or in the staff room. This experience taught me the importance of having sufficient rapport and a sense of presence before conducting any formal interview and conversation with the school community.

Nonetheless, this incident did not lessen my motivation to approach them. After a few weeks, I sensed that there was a change in their acceptance towards me.

*It was nearly 12.30 pm one Friday afternoon. I was alone in the school canteen. There was no one to accompany me for lunch. Nevertheless, it did not stop me from ordering the food, as I was very hungry and felt that I could eat a horse. I have a tough assignment today, conducting several interview sessions with students and a few observations. I ordered quite a heavy lunch, as I had not had any breakfast that morning. As soon as the food was ready, I ate passionately without realising that someone had greeted me from behind. When I turned around, I was half-shocked when I saw the school principal. I was ashamed for not having greeted her first. However, her warm smile lessened my embarrassment. She then joined me for a drink as she had just finished her duty, patrolling around the school compound. We did not manage to have a long discussion as I saw*

*her repeatedly looking at her watch. I was quite perturbed by her action. I guessed she might have another commitment. As soon as she finished the last sip of her drink, instantly she invited me to join an informal group gathering exclusively for female Muslim teachers held at a small mosque, a few metres away from the canteen. I was a bit surprised. Unconsciously, I nodded my head and said 'Yes.' I followed her to the mosque. I came to learn from her that there was a regular, informal religious gathering for female Muslim staff every Friday afternoon as a means to get together and strengthen the relationship. As soon as I reached the place, the staff were mostly there and they were about to start the gathering. I realised that all eyes were on me. Suddenly, they reached out to shake my hand and they tenderly hugged and kissed me warmly. At that moment, I started to feel changes in their response. I was moved.*

Field notes: 5 August 2009

Indeed, I was grateful to the school principal who played her role in introducing me to the school community. The above incident was the starting point for the school community accepting my presence in the school. My awkwardness gradually disappeared. I learned that adapting to their environment and having a sense of respect for the school community were necessary for obtaining their acceptance.

Six school administrators were appointed to hold administrative positions in this school, as assigned by the Ministry of Education to cater for the needs of the school community. The administration and management in Malaysian schools includes the management of offices, personnel, student affairs, student registration, curricular and extra-curricular activities, counselling, discipline, resource centres, examinations, finance, physical development, scholarships, hostels, and the textbook loan scheme (Omardin Ashaari, 1996). I managed to interview five of the six administrators. Similar to all the participants, I gave them anonymous names to protect their identities: Madam Fateema (School Principal), Madam Yati (Senior Assistant-Administration and

Academic Affairs), Mr Lim (Senior Assistant-Student Affairs), Mr Loga, (Head of Discipline Unit), and Mr Adam, (Senior Assistant-Extra Curricular Activities).

### **“It’s beyond our grasp”**

*At first, I was too stressed with the condition of the school. With the total number of approximately 3,500 students, it seemed like a culture shock for me. As you can see, the cramped, hot, and stuffy teachers’ room is not conducive at all for them. The same also goes for the situation in the classroom. The large number of students in the classroom makes the space smaller. Due to the limited space, they can’t even put the dustbin in the classroom. So how can students make themselves comfortable learning in the classroom?*

*Teachers are also having problems with the school’s infrastructure. Besides facing limited and stuffy spaces for their rooms, they also need to endure placing themselves in a very small meeting room.*

(Madam Fateema)

I was taken aback Madam Fateema’s initial responses when I posed my first question as to how she felt about the school in general. I could feel the strain and tension engulf this middle-aged Malay woman following her comments concerning the school’s condition and the number of students. Her culture shock was plausible when she was made School Principal. When I conducted the interview, she had just been transferred to the school three months previously, replacing the former Chinese female School Principal who had also been transferred to another school.



Admittedly, at first, I had mixed feelings meeting her as I was thinking how she would react to my request. As an outsider, I was getting anxious as I was researching sensitive issues concerning the condition of the school, particularly the counselling situation. I presumed it might create an uneasy situation for her to disclose her story. To my surprise, she greeted me warmly and was quite open to disclose the issues. In fact, she sought for an apology, as she was new to the school environment and had little knowledge about the school's current situation. Her humbleness and warm character touched me.

I could feel her frustration when she commented on the situation of the classrooms and teachers' working areas, which were not conducive for teaching and learning. Madam Fateema reiterated her views concerning the inadequacy of the cramped and stuffy rooms. According to her, they had to endure sitting in a crowded classroom that seated approximately 50 pupils, almost double compared with other secondary school classrooms. In addition, the number was not in line with the size of the classroom, which was designed for class sizes of 30 pupils. This was clearly creating a distressing situation for the pupils, as well as putting their focus and motivation at risk. She mentioned that they were bound to abide by the rules prescribed by the Local Education Office concerning the number of pupils in the classroom. Madam Fateema clearly explained the classroom opening system, which was based on the available classrooms in this school:

*Let's say if they (Local Education Office) ordered us to open 16 classes, we have to carry out the order accordingly. So, the number of students in every classroom will be divided depending on the classes available. However, based on my previous experience, we tend to restrict the number of underachievers in certain classes as a means to control their behaviour.*

I also managed to scrutinise the school's physical facilities and infrastructures through the school's annual magazine. It indicated that this school was equipped with several facilities: three science laboratories for biology, chemistry, and physics; five common laboratories; two computer laboratories; three home science rooms; two rooms for life skills workshops; one library or resource centre; one cooperative and books shops; one sick bay; one small meeting room; and one small mosque. Despite the fact that the

school was equipped with these facilities, two things saddened me as I observed that the school was encountering a wide range of poor facilities, including insufficient toilets and parking spaces for staff. Of all 10 toilets allocated for staff, only 6 units could be used, while 25 out of 35 units could be used by students. Additionally, there were only 10 parking spaces available for staff in which 5 spaces were allocated for cars, 1 for motorcycles, and 4 for bicycles. Consequently, most of them double-parked their vehicles either outside the main gate or at the back of school buildings.

As the new School Principal, it was a tough role for Madam Fateema to manage. It was also beyond her control to reform everything immediately. For the time being, the teachers needed to accommodate themselves within the school's current situation. The large number of school pupils was beyond her imagination. According to Madam Fateema, there were only 186 teachers to cater for 3,490 students. This indicates that the teacher-student ratio was about 1:19, while in the classroom, the ratio would be 50:1. This ratio signified the extra burden carried by the schoolteachers in managing students in the school, as well as encountering their attitude in the classroom. This situation was an additional cause of distress to the teachers, as they had to face turbulent and chaotic classrooms. Madam Fateema recounted:

*The large amount of students contributes to this uncontrolled condition in this school. There are 11 floating classrooms (students are placed in temporary locations like the science laboratory for a certain period of time), which indirectly contribute to the disciplinary problems among them.*

When I listened to her story, I could imagine the struggle faced by teachers to control the students' rowdiness prior to the lessons. It would undoubtedly take its toll on their self-motivation, as well as their patience and perseverance in facing this difficult situation. In other words, teachers would spend less time teaching and more time managing the classroom and students' behaviours. I anticipated that this situation would also create considerable tension, especially among the pre-service teachers who had less experience in dealing with large numbers of troublesome students.

According to Madam Fateema, they could do nothing except be patient in facing this difficult situation. She recounted:

*As for teachers, they do not complain much as they already know the school's condition. However, they do complain about the noisy and uncontrolled classrooms. For the time being, I have just advised them to use any means to control the classroom. They need to be creative in handling their teaching and learning process.*

The number of students was also a surreal picture for me. I had never encountered such a disproportionate number of school communities before. I still remember my experience in one secondary school during my previous counselling attachment, four years ago. The school had about 700 students. It was equipped with a sufficient number of teachers, as well as two school counsellors. Although it was an old school, the building was very well planned, as the classrooms were built facing the school compound. This had inevitably lessened the teachers' effort as they could systematically observe pupils' behaviour from their staff room. Furthermore, the classroom was manageable as the number of pupils was small and thus they were in control. The counsellors could also cater to the needs of students appropriately.

The large number of students in this school also gave a different picture of the students' behaviour. I still remember when I was making my observation around the school compound during a classroom lesson. I was in disbelief to see pupils, especially boys, happily playing hide and seek between the three rows of the school's two double-storey buildings. In fact, I was nearly knocked over when their friends tried to catch them. Surprisingly, they did not seem bothered about me at all. I was later astounded to discover that a few of the boys were in one of the groups who repeatedly went in and out of a stinking and overused toilet. They giggled all the way from the toilet, as if they had just come out from the cinema. No urgency was shown as they walked in a slow, stiff gait towards their classroom.

On other occasions, I stumbled upon pupils, especially boys, openly wasting time at the end corner of the building during lessons. Quickly, they ran from me or simply hid in the toilet when they saw me patrolling the school compound. In addition, I found that the school field situated at the back of the building seemed rather secluded and far away

from teachers' sight. Based on my conversation with the school community – counsellors, as well as the Head of Discipline and school pupils – this hilly place was famous for truants. School pupils who had escaped from their classrooms would prefer to be in this place and engaged in unhealthy activities, such as smoking or just wasting time and chatting.

During my conversation with Madam Fateema, I could sense that she was concerned with the welfare of the school community. Her leadership was evident when she described her endless efforts to accommodate the needs of teachers, as well as the school community. I had often seen her patrolling around the school compound after recess, bringing a cane with her. It was not her intention to portray a fierce image in front of her students; it was simply the usual scenario in secondary schools in Malaysia where Discipline Teachers and School Principals are responsible to maintain discipline among pupils (Abdullah Sani, 2005). They are allowed to carry a cane with them as a means to curb pupils' ill behaviours. She did the task responsibly although several discipline teachers were available for these duties. As a new principal, she wanted to understand and obtain her first impression of the school's actual situation. Moreover, she felt responsible for easing the teachers' burden by carrying out this responsibility of ensuring that pupils were back in their classroom after their recess period.

As the School Principal, Madam Fateema seemed determined and optimistic of changing the climate of the school's environment. Although they were experiencing a very tough situation, she did not easily lose faith. Instead, she tried to encourage the teachers to perform their duties through all necessary means, and at the same time, continuously tried to resolve the problems of the poor school facilities.

*We are trying as much as we can to cater to the needs of the students as well as the teachers. At the same time, we have also tried to improve the condition of the meeting rooms, as well as the problem of floating classrooms. So far, we have managed to obtain four classrooms so that the problem of floating classrooms has been reduced. We have tried from time to time to make use of any available rooms for teachers to settle themselves in.*

Unlike Madam Fateema, Madam Yati, conveyed a very different personal impression in respect of the school situation. As an experienced school administrator for 15 years, she seemed to be used to the school environment. She described her teaching experience in this school as meaningful, as she had managed to learn the different ranges of the students' behaviour every day. She admitted that she loved this school very much. Her eyes reflected her honesty. Enthusiastically, she mentioned that her experience was wonderful, but challenging. Her interest was evident when she boldly admitted that she would prefer to go home late after school hours and was still eager to come to school early the next day. She mentioned that she could not wait to face the challenges each day. According to her, this school brings all sorts of enjoyment that could challenge her capabilities as a teacher as well as a school administrator. I could picture her sense of emotional connectedness with the school community as she stated that she would prefer to stay here rather than be transferred to another school. She disclosed:

*I love to be in this school. Although it is a big school (in terms of the high number of students); I love to face challenges every day. I'm more than happy to deal with heavy workloads. It brings me a sort of satisfaction when I can resolve all the obstacles.*

Although she loved handling various types of students' behaviour, she admitted that the large number of students did not strike a good balance with the school's capacity.

*Our greatest challenge so far is in terms of managing students' disciplinary problems. At this point, we have to deal with the large number of students. Can you imagine the chaotic situations that we have to face with 50 classes in the morning session and 40 in the afternoon? I would say, out of 15 classes of Form 5, 5 of them are good while the rest are not. As administrators, we have to understand that not all teachers are able to endure this situation. There are times that their emotions are out of control.*

She agreed with Madam Fateema's view that this situation would provide a dangerous threat to the school community in both the short and long-term. The imbalanced proportion between the teachers and the school pupils would result in a large number of

mischievous students. This would subsequently strengthen their influence within the school environment.

*...//.. can you just imagine, in Form 3, we have to handle about 598 students? For the time being, we need to double our duties in comparison to other schoolteachers and administrators.*

She mentioned many problems arising from the large number of students. Although this school had many excellent students academically, it was not among the best schools in the district, as the underachievers outnumbered the high achievers in their academic performance.

*I really hope that this school can be developed to achieve excellence in both its curriculum and extracurricular activities. We have lots of potential in terms of high achievers. Last year, there were 13 straight A students in the PMR examination (major examination for Form 3 students aged 15–16 years old). Unfortunately, we didn't turn out to be among the best schools as the percentage dropped because of the huge number of students who were mostly underachievers.*

**“They are near and yet so far”**

*I'm not a racist, but as far as I have observed, I can say that the Indian and Chinese students are not really concerned with the school cleanliness. They dare to throw rubbish everywhere, especially along the classroom corridors. I have spoken to students so many times during the school assembly, reminding them to take care of the school cleanliness. Unfortunately, my efforts were in vain. They do not seem to be bothered about it at all and keep on repeating the same bad behaviour. As a result, the school cleaners need to double their efforts to pick up the rubbish dumped by the students every day.*

(Madam Fateema)

*As for the underachievers, they cannot see the importance of knowledge in their lives. The attractions outside school lure them to work as part timers to earn extra money. They don't see the effect of working on their academic performances. In addition, some of them come from broken families who urge them to work to support their lives. They usually do the job after school until the early hours of the morning, which makes them sleepy, tired, and less focused in school the next day. There are students who are forced to come to school just for the sake of getting money from their parents. When they are here, they can easily eat at the school canteen. They choose to come to school rather than stay at home, as they can avoid helping their parents with household chores. There are cases of students opting to come to school just to kill time and escape from the uncomfortable conditions facing them at home like crowded and stuffy houses.*

(Mr Adam)

These are statements made by the administrators regarding the situation of the school pupils. They expressed their disappointment regarding certain students' attitudes towards the school. I could picture the students' sense of estrangement from school as I observed students throwing away rubbish at the back of the second floor classroom corridor. They did not bother about cleanliness; instead, they displayed their disrespectful behaviour by openly ignoring the school rules and regulations. They were here in body but not in spirit. School was regarded as any ordinary place for them. They would rather do anything they wanted without feeling guilty. Obviously, they did not show any sense of apprehension towards the school and were detached from it.

Mr Adam, the senior Assistant of Extracurricular Activities, conveyed the same impression regarding the students' cultural values. According to him, most students' prevailing economic status and family backgrounds shaped their values. Due to the constraints in their lives, students who came from a lower socio economic status had to endure the consequences of their family backgrounds and roles. They found that a working life was bringing much more enjoyment and pleasure to them. They did not

feel like they 'fitted' in the school. They seemed to obtain enjoyment outside school rather than reaping benefits in the classrooms and to have deviated from the actual purpose of being a student.

Besides getting money, peer groups had empowered students' behaviours. They felt cared for and respected by their peers. They showed neither concern about receiving the benefit from their lessons, nor did they bother about teachers catching them. They did not comprehend the purpose of education in their life. All they wanted to do was seek the attention of their peer groups and find enjoyment in their lives. According to Mr Loga, the Head of Discipline, those students' bad attitudes had started from truancy:

*The highest frequency in disciplinary cases is truancy. Students escape from the school compound for the sake of having a breakfast outside. Because of peer influence, they meet at the place, and they end up smoking. At the same time, these students also try to impart their bad influence on other juniors like those who are in Form 1 (13 years old) and Form 2 (14 years old).*

He added:

*Students from Form 3 (15 years old) are the biggest groups involved in truancy and smoking... Having a lack of attention from their families, they get instant fulfilment from their peers who are considered as having a major influence on their attitude.*

Indeed, most students regarded friends as great supporters for their actions. At the same time, they tried to strengthen their influence by recruiting other pupils, especially juniors to be in their group. Excessive loyalty was shown to friends rather than respect to parents, teachers, and the school community. They were far from obeying the school rules and regulations. Obviously, their behaviour seemed to be a contradiction to the school aspiration.

Mr. Loga described different patterns of students' attitudes based on three racial backgrounds and their socio economic status.



*A few Chinese students don't have any interest in their studies. They just sleep in the classroom and do not bother about learning. During recess time, they go out eating at the canteen and do not really care about time.*

*... Students who are involved in disciplinary cases come from a lower socio economic status. There are a few students who have unemployed fathers. A few Chinese students admitted that they work part time after school as a means to get additional money to support their lives. When they come to school, they end up sleeping due to tiredness from working late.*

*Most Indian students are involved in truancy. They take a long time to come into the classroom. It usually happens in between the transition period in the morning and afternoon session. They try their best to gain attention and support from juniors in the afternoon session. Moreover, they always skip the assembly session by involving themselves in smoking. In addition, they tend to be noisy when teachers are teaching. They clearly do not display any respect towards the teacher in the classroom.*

*Malay students are also involved in truancy. They escape easily from the school compound just to have a breakfast outside and then come again to the school. They claim that the food sold outside is far cheaper compared to the school canteen. Apart from buying food, they end up being involved in smoking due to the influence of peers.*

These stories of students' behaviour illustrated that most of them had displayed indifference to school but in different ways. Most Chinese students showed their estrangement from learning in subtle ways by keeping their boredom to themselves, while the Indian and Malay students openly displayed their aggressive behaviour as a

means to attract the teachers' attention. These patterns of behaviour were probably shown due to the influence of their respective peer groups who happened to be of similar racial background, hence, making them portray similar patterns of behaviour.

Mr. Loga, however, did not wholly blame the students for what had happened. According to him, the deterioration in the student-teacher relationships had partly contributed to the problem. Besides having a language barrier that impeded their learning process, these Chinese and Indian students were also experiencing a distant relationship with their teachers. They attempted to fit in certain groups and went to great lengths to feel accepted, including acting disrespectfully towards teachers. The classroom was perceived to be a boring place for them. They tried to compensate for their boredom by trying to do activities that brought them enjoyment. I discerned that this would be an endless cycle for teachers as well as students if their large numbers remained the same. Both had been experiencing hardships in life. This incidence seemed to demotivate them.

*They (Indian students) do not really understand what the teachers are teaching in the classroom as they are experiencing language barriers. That's why they end up making lots of noise and start to disturb each other. Some of them tend to go out and play truant. I always tell the teachers to build a relationship instead of performing their teaching for the whole period.*

Furthermore, according to Mr Loga, those students in trouble were not receiving appropriate examples from their parents. The permissive style of parenting seemed to be a threat to their children. School pupils were perceived to be lost in their way of life, as their negative behaviour and acts were considered permissible. He recounted that:

*Some of the parents do not seem to have respect or understand the school's decision. They can't accept the fact that their children are going to be expelled from school. This is evidenced by their shocking decision of using political advocates to prevent such action, thus saving their children.*

His views were in common with Mr Lim (Head of Student Affairs) who communicated:

*There are parents who do not seem to understand the school rules and regulations. For example, a few of them contested the restricted use of mobile phones in school.*

I became aware of a different culture being displayed by these parents compared with previous years. Parents did not blame their children for their wrongdoings; instead, they tried to protect them by every means. They did not seem to pay much respect to the school institution, so neither did their children. As a result, the students' negative behaviour was strengthened, as there was nobody acting as a good role model for them.

Indeed, there seemed to be a clash of cultures being observed between the parents, students, and the school community. Most of the troublesome students had been deviating from the school aspiration. They had been creating their own way of life that was not healthy for the survival of the school community or the counselling services. It was hard work for the school administrators to juggle with the situation. They were hoping that all parties would contribute significantly towards the school development. Their hope was parallel with this saying "It's not about who you are; it's the efforts that count".

**"...nevertheless, it's still foggy and blurry"**

I should say that at the very beginning of my conversation with the school administrators, all had given positive remarks concerning the benefits of counselling services towards the students' development and well-being. During the conversation, all of them indicated their full support for the service.

Madam Fateema acknowledged the role of school counsellors. She pronounced that *"...all counsellors are active in organising programmes to cater for the needs of the students."*

On a similar note, Mr Lim also provided a good overview about counselling. He indicated that there was a good relationship between counselling and his unit in the sense that counselling services were considered vital to resolve students' behavioural problems. He commented:

*So far, I find counselling is very good. All the counsellors have shown their cooperation and performed their job successfully. They have helped many students in difficulties by conducting individual as well as group counselling. They have conducted various programmes like developmental and prevention programmes, such as drug prevention, smoking, etc. So far they have been working as a team... very good.*

Throughout our conversation, Mr Lim did not make a single negative comment about counselling. Among all the administrators I interviewed, I found that he was quite reserved in voicing his opinion. Although he had 30 years of experience being a teacher and 15 years as a school administrator, he preferred to play safe in expressing his views about the school situation. Mr Lim seemed cautious in disclosing and sharing his opinions. My notion was realised when I overheard several complaints made by two counsellors about his indecisiveness in making judgements, particularly relating to the punishment of troublesome students. Although little information was gained from him, it clearly did not dampen my spirit. He might feel that it was embarrassing for him to disclose weaknesses on his own part. Instead, I appreciated his cooperation for providing me with the school building plan and location. I felt considerably blessed and grateful to receive such important information. Previously, during my interviews with other school administrators, I had received no such documentation about the school. They had only orally provided me with the current list and figures relating to the school community.

Nevertheless, collectively, all the school administrators had admitted that the guidance and counselling services in this school only managed to perform a minimal role. They admitted that the presence of the counselling unit was perceived as the only place for tackling troublesome students. Their remarks were based on what they saw regularly happening around the service. The role of counselling was biased towards managing students in trouble rather than extending their services to any other students. Although counsellors were conducting many developmental programmes, for example, career

day, drug prevention and study skills, the stigma still lingered greatly in the minds of students.

Madam Fateema admitted that many disciplinary cases handled by the counsellors triggered this issue. She acknowledged:

*...//... I think many of them do not clearly understand the actual functions of counselling. They simply relate counselling with troublesome students who committed disciplinary problems.*

She added:

*I think counselling deals with lots of disciplinary cases. But I don't deny that there are many activities being done by counsellors. I can't blame them for this. It is just because the students are not fully exposed to the concept.*

As a researcher, I perceived the stigma to be an endless cycle. The students' sense of understanding towards counselling services was more or less developed from the school cultural system. They had been exposed to the routine task of school counselling. Every day, they were conditioned to see the usual picture of the school counselling services, which dealt excessively with students in trouble. Undoubtedly, other students would consider these as shameful experiences. As a result, they would rather avoid being connected with the unit, or else they would succumb to the negative labelling and teasing from their fellow friends. Hence, this situation had created a negative vicious cycle among them.

Mr Adam mentioned similar accounts:

*Unfortunately, I have found that most of the students are not really having a sense of understanding about the actual function of the counselling room. It appears to them that those who go there are considered troublesome students. Moreover, they perceive that the counselling room is meant for those who are considered in a critical stage of being expelled from school or for those who are having demerit problems. They are far from knowing that counselling provide lots of activities for students' development.*

Furthermore, the treatment practised by counsellors and the school community had also triggered students' hesitation towards the service and hence, clouded their views on the actual role of school counsellors. Mr Adam further mentioned that:

*...//... the awareness (about the purpose of counselling) is not there. When the students enter the room, they are first bombarded with "your names are already in the disciplinary board list, so you guys better be careful".*

*Most of them believe that counselling could save them from being suspended and expelled from school. As you know, counsellors have been given the right to protect their clients during the disciplinary board meeting. They can help students by providing sufficient proof and reasons for putting off the punishment. Prior to the meeting, I had seen many students flooding into the room requesting a reprieve.*

Indeed, I could feel that those troublesome students had superficially accepted counselling. The practice of the school ethos and processes in addressing the service precipitated this. Mr Adam's statements somehow conveyed the message that counsellors were seen as the only persons that could save school pupils from trouble. Those students in trouble believed that counsellors would do their best to protect them from being suspended from school, so perceived them as saviours to sustain their existence in school. They would perform community work, such as painting or maintaining the school compound, as compensation for their wrongdoing, not knowing whether these activities provided insightful thinking or lead them towards a better person or not. Mr Adam added:

*I think too much exposure has been given to the counselling room as a place for troublesome students, and not for students' development. There is a relative relationship between disciplinary action and counselling. Counselling after all is considered as the last resort for those students.*

Besides the lack of understanding about the role of the counselling service, most school administrators mentioned that there was inadequate promotion of counselling services being disseminated among the school community. No extra effort was being taken to

shed light on the understanding of the services available. Old beliefs about counselling continuously clouded the services. Mr Adam recounted this through his statements:

*There is no call to promote counselling to students other than to the troublesome ones. I can see that only the underachievers come to the counselling room.*

Despite their comments concerning the ambiguous role of school counselling, they admitted that the problem of a large number of troublesome students was seen as a major hindrance to the counselling service. Mr Adam expressed his sympathy for the counsellors concerning their tough job, as they needed to juggle numerous cases of troublesome students. It became obvious when they needed to spend most of their time listening to students' grievances and their various distressing stories. He illustrated:

*Sessions need to be put on hold due to the demand of a pile of disciplinary cases received each day. These things take a toll on the role and responsibilities of the counsellor. The situation now is just like in the court, in which the sessions have to be suspended. With the ratio of one counsellor for every 500 students, the condition of counsellors is about the same as for medical doctors who have to cater for the ratio of one to 600 patients. Due to lots of cases, counsellors opt to give top priority to the most needy students who are mostly underachievers or students in trouble, in comparison to those who can manage to handle themselves. As a result, high achievers' clearly cannot see the benefit of counselling.*

As a counsellor educator, I was aware that although the ratio of one counsellor for 500 students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2009) has been implemented as a common national standard for every secondary school in Malaysia, it seemed incompatible with the needs of this school as they were faced with many troublesome students. This school had changed the scenario of the counsellors' roles and orientation from offering the service to all students to the act of providing remedial solutions to those needy ones, in particular, the troublesome students. It had considerably changed the entire picture of counselling services, as well as the overall perception and acceptance towards the service.

Besides handling students' attitudinal problems, counsellors were also required to juggle their tasks with handling students' family problems, which obviously took an enormous amount of their time and energy. Moreover, counsellors needed to comply with the basic principles of counselling which required them to conduct a minimum three sessions for each client depending on the client's needs, availability and the model of counselling employed which obviously kept them fully occupied.

Mr Adam later informed me about the procedure for handling the cases of those troublesome students:

*When a disciplinary case occurs, first, we will make sure that a particular student is sent for counselling. After the session, the counsellor needs to provide his or her report and send it to the student affairs' unit. The student will then be needed to be monitored in two to three or more counselling sessions. Then he or she will be put under probation for a certain time. If he or she does not appear to show any progress, he or she will be sent to the board meeting, and further action might be taken either by being suspended or expelled from school.*

Having listened to these procedures, I could picture the burden carried by the counsellors. Besides handling sessions, they needed to prepare a thorough report for the discipline unit before any further disciplinary action would be taken. In other words, every single action was dependent on the counsellors' report. The counsellors' excessive workload of students in trouble had indirectly disregarded the non-troublesome students. As a result, they did not bother to come to the unit, as they did not expect a beneficial outcome. Furthermore, a lack of attachment and sense of belonging enhanced their hesitation concerning the service.

In addition, the huge number of troublesome students had also had a great impact on the counsellors' time, as they were unable to conduct a proper follow up on several cases and programmes. This issue was highlighted by Mr. Loga when he expressed his disappointment with the counsellors' inability to implement the follow up programmes, which could be effective for monitoring the well-being of students and curb their bad



behaviour. His frustration was clearly detected from the tone of his voice, as he expressed the following statement:

*The thing that I am not really satisfied with now in the counselling programme is that there is no follow up being done after the programme. We need to monitor every single student after doing the programme. This may be because the high number of students has become a barrier for them to do so.*

**“Should I trust you?”**

Apart from the high number of students, administrators also highlighted cultural mistrust as being connected to the students’ reluctant attitudes towards counselling. According to Mr Loga, students had been showing their preference to see counsellors of their own racial background who they perceived to be more approachable and trusted. He communicated:

*Personally, I think students are in need of counsellors from their own racial groups. They feel more comfortable in speaking and divulging their problems due to the same cultural background that they share. Counselling will only be effective if there is a mutual understanding shown by the counsellors and clients from the same cultural background.*

As the Head of Discipline, Mr Loga admitted that he was torn between the need to listen to the problems of Indian students and securing his position. His anguish was noticeable throughout his conversation.

*I do admit that a few Indian students are afraid of disclosing their problems. They do have problems, but at the same time, they are afraid of letting them out for fear of not having trust towards teachers. They wanted to see me, but my role as a discipline teacher had prevented them from doing that. I really appreciate the effort taken by the Local Education Office (JPN) for sending us one Indian counsellor to cater for*

*the needs of Indian students. At least my ambition to get an Indian counsellor has been accomplished.*

I could understand his dilemma, as he was struggling to strike a balance between managing his role as the Head of Discipline with listening to the concerns of students of his own racial background. I managed to experience this situation when it happened to me in the midst of conducting an interview with him. A female teacher who was a member of one of the discipline committees came into the room bringing a group of Indian boys accused of committing several offences. These boys tried to prove their innocence by trying to provide reasons for the blame. In the middle of their arguments, Mr. Loga raised his voice to the highest pitch, urging the boys to stop telling lies and prompted them to seek an apology from the teacher straight away. I could see their pouting lips and frowning faces indicating their annoyance with the situation. As the Head of Discipline, he had no choice, as he needed to be firm and decisive to maintain the teacher's dignity in the eyes of the students.

Three school administrators, Madam Fateema, and Mr Adam also voiced a similar issue. They reported their concern regarding Indian and Chinese students who suffered from a language barrier. According to them, students were in need of counsellors of the same cultural background to comprehend their needs. According to Madam Fateema:

*I think the real problems encountered by counsellors are language and communication problems. With the majority being Malay female counsellors, I found that it is hard for Indian and Chinese students, especially from remedial classes to adapt themselves to new environments. They seem unable to express themselves fully because they are stuck with their own language.*

*I think the biggest challenges they face now are in terms of handling socio cultural and racial differences of students. It is very hard for Malay counsellors to handle Chinese and Indian clients due to the language differences.*

(Mr Adam)

Madam Yati mentioned a parallel view of reticent behaviour shown by Chinese students towards approaching Malay counsellors. It was closely related to their value systems that involved the act of protecting dignity and avoiding shameful experiences. She framed this in her statements:

*Chinese students rarely come to see counsellors because they don't like to create any problems. They just come to school and then sleep in the classroom. They do not even bother their teachers and others. If they do have problems, they will try to keep them to themselves.*

In respect of this issue, Mr. Adam and Mr Loga began to suggest the notion of appointing counsellors of the same racial background to meet the students' needs and counter the issue of barriers among students.

*The appointment of counsellors should be based on the local needs of the students' racial proportion where the majority of them are Indian, followed by Chinese, and the rest are Malay. Unfortunately, the Malay counsellors' outnumber Chinese and Indian counsellors. However, I'm afraid that the current situation is not healthy as it might produce hypocritical students due to the lack of trust of other races. Thus, having counsellors from the same racial background can help to instil and inculcate values that are in line with their belief systems.*

(Mr Adam)

Mr Loga's belief was based on his surprise at seeing the impact and the changes in students' attitudes following the appointment of an Indian counsellor. He observed that Indian students were adapting themselves comfortably with counsellors of the same racial background.

*As for now, I'm really happy to see that those students who are considered hard core have shown a change in their attitude.*

*I have seen many Indian students come and see Mr Siva and I'm very happy about that. I think he is doing his job very well.*

Furthermore, according to Madam Yati, the appointment of counsellors from the same racial background would make the counselling process much easier as parents could communicate and discuss their children's welfare. This would increase their involvement and strengthen their relationship with the school authority.

*Their numbers (counsellors) should be balanced so that the needs of different kinds of students can be addressed appropriately. Furthermore, it would allow parents of different racial backgrounds to communicate with them effectively, thus, the gap between the parents and school can be improved.*

(Madam Yati)

In addition to the students' inability to converse in the Malay language, their sense of estrangement and emotional disconnectedness contributed to their hesitation to approach the counsellors. Mr Adam further strengthened this notion when he communicated that the counsellors' lack of competency in addressing the needs of different racial backgrounds was seen to be incompatible with the students' local needs. This could present barriers to the students, as they would have less confidence to disclose their problems to the counsellors. Consequently, this would impinge on their relationships with students, and, thus, limit their ability to extend their services. Hence, in order to bring them back to the service, students of different racial backgrounds desperately needed sufficient trust and security. He suggested that counsellors be more sensitive to the local needs of students rather than only depending on certain theories and approaches.

*...//... moreover, counsellors should be well equipped with multiple skills to manage students' problems. Furthermore, they should equip themselves with the knowledge of local contexts to cater to the clients' needs rather than depending on Western theories and models of helping.*

In order to counter the issue of a large number of students, as well as creating a sense of understanding towards counsellors' roles, Mr. Adam urged that counselling knowledge and skills should be disseminated and extended widely to all the teachers and the school community. This could help in monitoring the students' behaviour, as well as addressing their needs. He mentioned:

*...//... besides that, counselling skills and knowledge should be extended and applied to all teachers so that they could provide enough support for the counsellors from behind. In other words, counselling skills are not exclusively restricted to counsellors. Teachers will not only comprehend counsellors' roles, they will give a helping hand to support counsellors, thus, this will eliminate the notion and belief that only counsellors are responsible for handling students' attitudes.*

In addition, Mr. Adam responded that there was an urgent need to upgrade the current condition of school counselling. The number of counsellors in the counselling unit and its infrastructure needs to be increased and upgraded to restore students' interest in the service.

*First, I think the Local Education Officer should add more counsellors. In addition, counsellors need a proper place for them to deliver their function effectively.*

*...//... Counsellors should be given a separate and a proper place to function effectively. As for now, there are many disruptions and disturbances around them. For instance, there is a classroom just beside the counselling room that is absolutely not conducive to conduct the session. In addition, they have a problem with limited space to store their materials.*

The insights gained throughout the interview process were fruitful for me to understand the school's cultural system and the status of counselling in the eyes of school administrators. Frankly, these experiences moved me. I would not have expected that they would provide such important inputs into the effectiveness of school counselling. I found this experience enlightening, as I appreciated other views, especially from those who were not directly involved in the implementation of school counselling. Their views gave me a fuller picture of the school's current situation that could be closely related to the school's counselling services.

After using both macro and micro interpretive lenses, I could now finally see the holistic picture of counselling services in this school. I realised that counselling services were not a solo act in this arena. Views from other parties in the same platform of the school community were considered to be of paramount importance. This situation could be best represented by this Malay idiom “bagaikan aur dengan tebing” (like bamboo and the riverbank). This indicates that a sense of understanding among the school community is very important. To ensure its survival, the existence of counselling services is also dependent on mutual understanding and cooperation of the other units within the school community.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **DISCUSSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Introduction**

Now, I am reaching the final leg of my journey. I realise that it is time for me to set out the key issues raised by this research and present conclusions based on the analysis of my findings. In preparing this chapter, I could not help but allow my memory to linger on my experiences during the initial stages of my research process. I started this research by looking at the cultural values of students from the perspectives of three racial groups in Malaysia, notably, Malay, Chinese and Indian, all of whom were present in the school. I anticipated seeing differences in the cultural values of these racial groups and how these values influenced their attitudes towards the guidance and counselling services in the school. At that time, I was being influenced by literature predominantly from North America that stressed the influence of racial values on the perception of counselling services. My approach to the research seemed well-founded on existing literature. However, the first rule in qualitative research is that there should be the possibility of surprise in social research (Firebaugh, 2008). As I immersed myself in the research process, I was confronted with the realisation that other issues, more significant than racial culture, were influencing the students' attitudes towards the counselling service.

At the beginning of my journey, I could not have anticipated that by the middle of it, I would be checking my data and observations so carefully to ensure that my emerging realisations were correct. It took me some time to gain the confidence to abandon my original expectations and to accept that the beauty of qualitative research is that it can overturn even well-informed expectations and lead to surprising conclusions.

This chapter will begin with summaries of key findings derived from the research participants as presented in the previous chapters. I will follow this with my presentation of the major issues that emerged. My discussion will consider the

implications for methodology, theory and practice. I will also offer several recommendations and guidelines for school counsellors, counsellor educators, counsellor trainees as well as the Ministry of Education Malaysia with regard to ways to improve guidance and counselling services given the challenging circumstances faced by the school that I studied.

## **Summary of Chapters' findings**

### **Differentiation of Students' Involvement in Guidance and Counselling Services**

During the process of undertaking this research, my original expectations of racial differences were replaced by an increasing awareness of the differences between what I identified as referred clients, self-referred clients and those not involved in counselling. Their perceptions of counselling are best represented by five different stories: "Finally, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel"; "I think I found my way home", "Finding hope, gaining insight", "They are not meant for us" and "We belong together".

The first three narratives, "Finally, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel", "Finding hope, gaining insight" and "I think I found my way home", provided the individual stories of referred clients, namely, one Malay boy, one Malay girl and one Indian boy, respectively. They mostly came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and displayed their sense of estrangement from school. Due to their hardships in life, the boys regarded their part-time jobs as more significant to their lives than their experiences as students in school. Furthermore, friends had become the most influential persons in their lives. There were similarities in their stories with regard to how they valued guidance and counselling before and after the counselling session. They began to appreciate and understand the role of counselling after being exposed to the service.

The narrative "They are not meant for us" reflected the views of those uninvolved in counselling with regard to school counsellors as well as guidance and counselling services. Besides commenting that counsellors have nagging characters, they also



mentioned that the services do not provide them any benefit, either personally or academically, and thus, have failed to win their commitment.

These two groups of students, i.e. those referred and those uninvolved in counselling, shared similar views about the perceived stigma associated with receiving counselling. The former linked counselling to punishment, while the latter related it to students in trouble. The counsellors were viewed as the staff dealing with students' disciplinary problems.

Last but not least, the third group of students, who were identified as self-referred clients, had a much more positive understanding of counselling and held more positive attitudes from the outset of the interviews as well as throughout my observations in the counselling room. Most significantly, they exhibited positive attitudes towards the schooling processes and had a real interest in learning. The theme "We belong together" indicated their sense of connection and belonging to the service. They claimed that they had obtained many benefits and experienced greater achievement in their academic and personal lives as a result of consulting school counsellors. Additionally, the counsellors were perceived as having favourable characteristics such as being kind, loving and caring. Despite their positive attitudes towards counselling, this group admitted to facing threats and stigma from teachers as a consequence of seeing counsellors.

### **The Plight of School Counsellors**

The second presentation of my findings is related to school counsellors' stories. There are four narratives that I present in this chapter. I named them "It's blood, sweat and sometimes tears", "When two worlds collide", "Travelling a rocky road" and "It is not the end... It's just the beginning".

The first narrative, "It's blood, sweat and sometimes tears", indicated the suffering endured by school counsellors in dealing with the attitudes of students towards the service. They reported having difficulty in establishing an initial rapport with the students, whether Malay, Chinese or Indian. The school counsellors also mentioned

that the students, whether high achievers or underachievers, displayed their resistance to counselling programmes in distinct ways. The former simply ignored them, while the latter retaliated against them.

The next narrative, “When two worlds collide”, reveals the students’ negative attitudes towards school processes. Most underachievers come from a lower socioeconomic background and regard school as largely irrelevant to their lives. Moreover, peer groups were reported to be the biggest influence in the students’ lives. In addition, the excessive student numbers and difficulty in establishing control in the school seemed to increase the students’ sense of disrespect towards the school community.

Negative attitudes towards guidance and counselling services were not only exhibited by the students; they extended more widely in the school community. The counsellors’ third narrative, entitled “Travelling a rocky road”, revealed the sour relationships between the counsellors and the school communities who displayed confusion about the role of counselling. There was no sense of understanding and respect for the counsellors’ roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, the counsellors reported being subjected to prejudice from teachers and biased treatment from administrators. They also reported that they were continuously working on the worst end of a downward spiralling school climate, rather than being positively responsive to the situation. This is due to the constraints of physical facilities, support and manpower.

Despite experiencing low trust and a lack of support from the school community, they still retained strong hope that the service could be promoted to the school community, particularly to the students. The narrative entitled “It is not the end... It’s just the beginning” conveys the counsellors’ endless hopes in promoting counselling and finding its place within the school system. This includes their unique approaches and efforts to address the needs of students.

### **School Community’s Deteriorating Climate**

The teachers’ stories confirmed what was discussed in the previous sections about the students’ and school counsellors’ stories. I presented two narratives in this section. The

teachers' narratives highlighted the issue of students' disrespectful behaviour. These presented the many problems they experienced, including difficulties in managing classroom lessons as well as the lowering of their overall motivation level. It became apparent that most of the teachers regard counselling as very marginal. Although they were quite sympathetic towards counselling services, they admitted that the service suffers from having an ambiguous role. In addition, they admitted that guidance and counselling services had not extensively reached the whole student population. The individual counselling approach, which is the main method used by the counsellors, was seen to be ineffective in tackling the problems related to counselling. Nevertheless, they admitted that the structural issues characterised by the lack of physical resources in the school and overcrowded classrooms have hindered the implementation of counselling.

### **Reformation of Faith: It's a Mutual Effort**

The school administrators corroborated the counsellors' and teachers' concerns regarding the structural issues highlighted by them. This final chapter presents three stories of school administrators. I named them "It's beyond our grasp", "They are near and yet so far" and "...nevertheless, it's still foggy and blurry".

"It's beyond our grasp" conveys the structural issues facing the school administrators. They admitted that the teachers had been experiencing a loss of power in curbing the students' poor behaviour due to the large number of students in the classrooms and the lack of physical facilities.

In addition, there was an erosion of boundaries between students and school communities. Among their stories, "They are near and yet so far" highlighted the students' estrangement and resistance to school. These problems seemed to create considerable difficulties in terms of classroom management for the teachers and the school as a whole. They also impinged on the effectiveness of the guidance and counselling services in school.

The findings from the school administrators also supported what was discussed earlier about the role of counsellors and school counselling services. The theme “...nevertheless, it’s still foggy and blurry” conveys the school administrators’ views of the conflicting roles and status of school counselling. Despite the encouragement and support given by the school administrators, it had continuously been clouded by social stigma and negative labelling. Most of the school administrators admitted that the emphasis placed by the school counsellors on dealing with troubled students has more or less formed their values towards the service. In addition, apart from applying certain counselling approaches, they suggested the importance of looking into the needs of the students in their contextual situation. In this vein, they recommended having counsellors who possess multicultural competencies in order to accommodate the needs of the students from different racial backgrounds. They considered that these measures would be likely to lessen the gap between the counsellors and students.

Basically, these are the issues raised and highlighted by the school communities with regard to their positions, values and attitudes towards school guidance and counselling services. Indeed, these findings opened my mind to accepting other possibilities related to the attitudes towards school counselling services.

As I analysed them, substantial issues emerged that relate to the position of counselling within the overall school structure. This analysis brought another set of issues to the fore that became the major source of insight. Therefore, my direction in the next section is to navigate between the indigenous meanings and understandings of the issue and the realms of theory which may not necessarily be familiar to the participants, but essential for an academic understanding. This is to ensure that the voices of my participants are not only heard by me, but also being listened to, understood and ultimately interpreted by a diverse audience in the academic arena and beyond. Thus, this is the core issue that emerged from my analysis.

## **School Guidance and Counselling Services: Lost in the Midst of Systemic Processes**

It has been such a long and arduous task for me to reach this stage of analysis. I regard the presentation of this analysis as the most challenging part, as it involves analytical description using a constructivist grounded theory approach. After rigorous scrutiny, the core theme, “School guidance and counselling services: Lost in the midst of systemic processes”, was chosen, as it was collectively communicated by most participants in the respective school. This issue had considerably affected the overall school scenario as well as the participants’ positive engagement with counselling services. In this section, I will discuss thoroughly the issue of the systemic processes faced by the school, and this will help provide an understanding of the participants’ values towards counselling services.

### **Changing values of students and the school system**

The findings of my study indicate that structural problems facing both the students and the school system significantly contributed to their involvement in school. Most of the participants—especially the counsellors, teachers and administrators—mentioned the students’ resistance to learning processes, in favour of their part-time jobs after school. They mentioned that the harsh economic realities facing the students played a decisive role in whether school was the most viable option for the students. The lack of family support and encouragement that the students received further confounded the decision between school and work. The findings of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) resonate with the results of my study. The OECD’s findings indicated that a high percentage of students from low socioeconomic status families attending a school with a large student body are more likely to have a lower sense of belonging and lower participation than those from higher socioeconomic status families attending schools with smaller numbers of students (Willms, 2003).

The school’s structural system also provides certain implications for the participants. The students in my research context showed their estrangement not only from their lessons but also from the school community. The referred clients spoke of reacting negatively to the institutional power structure of the school and employing behavioural

tactics that constitute part of a “culture of resistance” which is anti-school. Similarly, those participants especially who were not involved in counselling did not feel that the teachers and counsellors were concerned about their interests. They reported that they neither obtain genuine concern and understanding from the school community nor do they feel that they owe the teachers any respect. They generally perceived that the school system is more interested in maintaining authority and discipline than in providing education. In such a context, the students are less cooperative with teachers who are seen to be disrespectful to them and uninterested in their welfare. The issues of authority, power and respect represented the disparate power relations which exist within schools and were, thus, seen as areas of resistance. I observed that the four key relationships of school climate mentioned by Dorsey (2000)—the relationships of student to self, student to peers, student to parent and community and student to teacher, and administrators —was not positively exhibited by the participants. Indeed, the school had become powerless in establishing a good relationship between them, as it was unable to deal with the students’ behaviour (Gottfredson, 1989), and thus, inhibited a sense of cohesion and successful student outcomes (Stewart, 2008). The findings are also in agreement with Stewart (2008), who mentioned that a school’s experiences of higher levels of disorder relate to the situations where students do not believe they belong or feel cared for by the school personnel. Besides, Stewart added that an unsafe school is one that ignores misconduct; for instance, schools in which teachers and administrators have disagreements about the rules, or do not know them, and schools where students do not believe in the rules.

I learned from this study that the issue of the large number of students, the lack of physical facilities in the school and inadequate space for developing the students’ potential and capabilities had contributed to the school’s structural problems. These problems carry implications for the rest of the school system, including learning processes as well as students’ attitudes towards school guidance and counselling services. I find these situations echo the findings of Dei et al. (2007), who indicated that the negative values of students and the school system could adversely affect the overall school climate, possibly turning the school into a chaotic environment. In a similar vein, I do agree with Patton and McMahon’s (2006) assertion that these

elements (i.e. structural problems and students' attitudes) work in circular rather than linear patterns in which they are mutually influencing each other.

Additionally, I was enlightened by Leithwood and Jantzi (2009), who indicated that smaller schools benefit students most. Based on their review of 57 empirical studies about school size effects, they indicated that students who traditionally struggle at school and students from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds are the major benefactors of smaller schools. The results of the review indicated that secondary schools serving exclusively largely diverse and/or disadvantaged students should be limited in size to about 600 students or fewer, while those secondary schools serving economically and socially heterogeneous or relatively advantaged students should be limited in size to about 1,000 students. These results are in agreement with my study. The condition of this school, which consisted of a large number<sup>6</sup> of students (approximately 3,500), with the lack of physical facilities, was deemed inappropriate for the students and school community. Besides lacking teachers' attention, the students were vulnerable to the negative influence of peers. This echoes Silins and Mulford (2004), William and Walberg (1991) and Crosnoe, Johnson and Elder (2004), who mentioned that larger schools provide less benefits to students compared to smaller schools, where the latter indicate stronger engagement, superior "sticking" power and high student attendance and retention rates. Furthermore, smaller schools can promote higher participation and opportunities for students to participate in extracurricular activities than larger schools (McNeal & Ralph, 1999). Thus, students are more likely to feel connected and engaged and contribute more in smaller schools rather than larger schools.

### **Different Values towards the Role and Status of Guidance and Counselling Services**

My findings demonstrated that the participants, including pupils, school counsellors, school teachers and school administrators, displayed different views of the role and status of guidance and counselling services. The views of the participants were most

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<sup>6</sup> The mean average number of student per school in Malaysia is 1046 (OECD,2009)

divergent among the pupils, especially between the referred clients, those uninvolved in counselling and self-referred clients. The counselling room was perceived by most referred clients as merely a place for escapism from the demands of education. In marked contrast, those not involved in counselling perceived it as being exclusively for students in trouble. However, the self-referred clients displayed their belonging and attachment to the service.

I have based my explanation of the participants' different cultural values and attitude formation on three terms: "worldviews" (Ivey, D'Andrea, Ivey, Simek-Morgan, 2007), "cognition" (Bodenhausen, Macrae & Hugenberg, 2003) and "cultural schema" (Ridley, Mendoza, Kanitz, Angermeier & Zenk, 1994). These terms not only encapsulate values and opinions but also affect the behaviour of the participants. I consider that the establishment of the participants' worldviews, cognition process and cultural schema of counselling was preceded by knowledge and information acquired from their experiences within their environment, in particular the school system. The perceived image and treatment of counselling were regarded as a standard of evaluation for them to form either reluctance or positive attitudes towards the service. Furthermore, these elements could explain their selective attitudes when they preferred different platforms other than counselling that they had experienced as less threatening.

My findings align with Rafidah and Suradi (2005), Fang (2005), Yeap (2008) and Suradi (2010) who mentioned that students' limited knowledge about counselling significantly contributes to the lack of awareness of the benefit of counselling among school pupils and undergraduate students in Malaysia. In addition, the results from Vogel et al. (2007) on the anticipated outcomes and risks of counselling echoed my findings about the attitudes of those three groups of participants. The referred and self-referred clients anticipated outcomes from the service as a result of their positive experiences and possessed more knowledge about counselling services. This is in accordance with Manthei (2006), Cheung and Liu (2005), Goh et al. (2007) who mentioned that the clients' previous positive encounters with counselling had familiarised them with the process; hence, they were reassured of the benefit of counselling. In contrast, those not involved in counselling, following their poor experience with the service, anticipated being concerned about showing emotions. My



findings, thus, contradicted those of Wallace and Constantine (2005), Kramer et al. (2002), Kim (2003) and Kim and Omizo (2003) because they provided generalised explanations of participants' views from the essentialist perspective, such as the influence of collectivism-individualism and particular cultural adherence, with regard to values and attitude formation to counselling. This "psychogeographical picture" (views of human values and attitudes based on specific countries, regions and continents) portrayed a reductionist thinking (Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2010). My results, however, demonstrate that the participants' subjective views and experiences relate to their cultural contexts. As a non-essentialist researcher, I tend to agree with Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2010, p. 73) and Mallon (2007) that culture and human behaviour are not confined to a geographic location or biological differences among members of human categories, but are constituted by the relational and dynamic social forces between them. I consider that each of the participants had their own agency (MacKrill, 2009) in developing their preferences. These situations indicated that they were not easily trapped, governed and subjected to the essentialist cultural blocks.

Besides having certain worldviews and knowledge about the service, I discerned that the power of the social network surrounding the participants is one of the elements that encouraged or hindered them from availing of the service. The struggles and pains of finding clients reported by Madam Rohaya and Madam Fara were among the indicators which explain that seeking help from counsellors is not considered a social norm practiced by most pupils in the school. Govindasamy, Aziz and Aisya (referred students), for example, candidly admitted to the powerful influence of friends as a source of reference and enjoyment in their lives. Similarly, those not involved in counselling avoided the service, as it did not fit with their friends' and school communities' preferences. However, the self-referred clients mentioned that the support received from significant others such as counsellors, family and friends among the sources of their willingness to seek counselling.

I find that Smith and Draper's (2004) analogy likening the relational perspective of human beings to a spider in the process of constructing a web relates to the participants' situation in the school system. It is a process in a continuum in which their attitudes are not only constructed through internal forces but also from external stimuli including

peers and the school system. These interactions may change their perspectives, emotions and cognitions that subsequently inform their behaviour. My findings are, thus, consistent with Barksdale and Molock (2008), Ho et al. (2007), Vogel et al. (2007), Chandra and Minkovitz (2007), Cheung and Liu (2005), Yoo et al. (2005) and Nguyen and Anderson (2005), who respectively indicated that social pressure and the level of network orientation faced by adolescents inhibit their attitudes towards seeking psychological help. However, my findings differ in terms of the types of network relationships among the participants. The social pressure emphasised by those studies was related to family systems, whereas the present study was closely linked to the influence of peers and the school system. Therefore, I consider that the relationships formed by the participants with significant individuals in the school system could explain their acceptance of or withdrawal from the service.

Although the participants' network of relationships and social norms in the school system seemed to play significant roles in shaping their values and attitudes, my study nevertheless revealed that racial differences provide little explanation for the participants' values and attitudes towards guidance and counselling services. In spite of the fact that most of my participants' responses revolve around Chinese and Indian students, with less contributions from Malay students, it was not an indication of racial differences but due to the relative presence of Malay students who were minority in school and as a consequence they were under-represented as compared to their counterparts. My results are quite contradictory to the quantitative findings of Chen and Mak (2008), Kim (2000), Kim and Omizo (2007), Leong and Lau (2001) who all indicated that attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help and a general willingness to see a counsellor result from particular students' racial groups and adherence to their cultural values. My participants, especially the referred clients and those not involved in counselling, avoided the service because they personally perceived it to be different, unfamiliar and insecure. As a result, they enclosed themselves in a protective sphere. The self-referred clients, on the other hand, perceived counselling to be positive due to their subjective experiences, and hence, linked themselves closely to the service. My findings reject those essentialist views that tend to label human attitudes according to a specific categorisation of race or gender. I consider that this type of categorisation ignores the differences between human beings, which might

subsequently lead to marginalisation and oppression. Furthermore, I discern that human categorisation could provide an explanation for the ineffective findings of most of the local studies in Malaysia concerning this issue. This is in accordance with Jackson and Meadows (1991, p. 73), who mentioned that “continuing to focus on the more obvious surface manifestations of culture presents an artificial picture of what a particular culture is all about, allowing practitioners to continue viewing another culture from the prism of their own culture, thus can serve as a barrier to the understanding of another culture”. Furthermore, the relevancy of the findings would be questioned and underestimated, “as they are subject to change and are constrained by time” (Jackson & Meadows, 1991, p. 73). My findings are, thus, in accordance with the results of Komiya, Good and Sherrod (2000), Vogel and Wester (2003) which emphasised the importance of an individual’s psychological state of affairs in forming attitudes and willingness towards the service. I do, however, agree with Garcea (2005), who stated that an individual’s sense of belonging depends on something that he or she considers familiar and is comfortable with. Therefore, the participants’ values and attitudes were attributable to their subjective experiences within the broad spectrum of the school.

I found that most of my participants’ values, especially those who were not involved in counselling and the referred clients, had been entirely clouded by stigma and negative connotations. Stigma refers to “undesirable or socially unacceptable behaviour shown to recipients of counselling following an approach for psychological help” (Vogel et al. 2006, p. 325). I discern that the treatment they had received from the school system had become an underlying foundation for the participants’ negative attitudes. The emphasis placed by the school counsellors on catering to the needs of troublesome students seemed to influence the participants, especially those not involved in counselling, to determinedly avoid the service for fear of being negatively labelled by the school community. These findings echo McLeod (2007, p. 21), who mentioned that “counselling has been used to describe a disciplinary interview where a student is sent to see a counsellor to receive admonishment for wrongdoing”. I consider that the element of social stigma or public stigma (a perception that an individual is socially unacceptable; Vogel et al., 2006) was high amongst them. The participants, especially the referred clients and those not involved in counselling, reported a fear of the service due to the consistent negative labelling received from the school community.

Statements like “counselling is meant for those students in trouble” and “counselling means punishment” were reported as the only well-defined norms or social axioms set by the school community. Subsequently, social stigma leads to self stigma (the perception held by the individual that he or she is socially unacceptable (Vogel et al., 2006, 2007, and 2010). I consider that social stigma was heavily experienced by the participants due to their desire to conform to their group and the school system. As I analysed my findings, I found that they were also consistent with Chandra and Minkovitz (2007), Wallace and Constantine (2005), Hackler (2007,2008), Ludwikowski et al. (2009), Vogel et al. (2010, 2007, 2008), Komiya et al. (2000), Fang (2005) and Loya et al. (2010) regarding social stigma resulting from negative judgement for seeking help, and with Kuo et al. (2006) regarding social cynicism and interpersonal harmony as predictors of help-seeking attitudes. However, my findings did not concur with the latest research of Shechtman et al. (2010), who found that public stigma is not related to self stigma. The distinguishable feature of their findings in comparison with my results mainly concerns the characteristics of my participants, who to some degree conformed to the school system, while Shechtman et al.’s participants conformed less, as they mostly consisted of immigrant adolescents who had multiple values and attitudes. In this vein, I agreed with Sue (as cited in Baruth and Manning, 2003), who mentioned that system blame is more powerful than person blame. Hence, conformity to the school system could explain the strength of the formation of my participants’ reluctance to use a service that they stigmatised for the badly behaved students.

As I analysed the participants’ attitudes, I discerned that the differences in their values towards and acceptance of the service were also reflective of their multiple and changing identities in the school system. Some of their values were congruent to the service, while some others were discordant, and as a consequence, carried certain implications for school guidance and counselling. In explaining identity construction, I was interested in Sarup’s (1996) assertion that the “identities of human beings are multiple and mobile” (p. 57). According to him, people always construct their identities throughout their relationships and interactions with their surroundings. My participants, for example, Aziz, Govindasamy and Aisya (referred clients) managed to construct and transform their identities from being alienated from counselling to a sense of belonging to the service. As a result of a co-construction process in counselling sessions, Aziz, for

example, managed to loosen the grip of his friends' negative influence. He was then able to focus on his personal development and self-construction. Similar values were also exhibited by those not involved in counselling, who, at first, were indifferent towards the service. The exposure and experiences obtained from the interviews and counselling sessions seemed to open different worldviews for them. They managed to learn that counselling was beneficial for their personal development. Similarly, the multiple identities of the counsellors resulted from their accommodating roles with different types of clients. Hence, the participants' changing identities, values and attitudes towards the service were due to their dynamic interaction with the school system.

### **Different views of school counsellors.**

The findings of this research indicated that there were different values and attitudes among the participants towards the school counsellors' characteristics. Those pupils especially not involved in counselling reported their estrangement from school counsellors based on their previous experiences and perceptions of the counsellors' characteristics. For instance, they reported that the school counsellors had nagging characters and were closed-minded and indifferent. The problem of a language barrier had also exacerbated the gap between them. However, the referred clients and self-referred clients indicated the counsellors' positive characteristics including warm treatment, nurturing relationship and compassion. Both of these groups communicated their appreciative values, closeness and attachment to the school counsellors. The counsellors' understanding and respectful behaviours had indeed moved them. Govindasamy and Aziz (referred clients), for example, reported their admiration for the sincerity of the school counsellors in helping them. Similar values were also conveyed by those self-referred clients who were deeply engaged with the kindness and helpful attitudes of the school counsellors. However, I was also informed by the teachers and administrators as to the counsellors' ineffective approaches. Madam Nur (teacher) and Mr Adam, (school administrator), for example, viewed the school counsellors as less creative, lacking in multicultural skills and less accommodating to the needs of the students. I find that the results of Constantine et al. (2002), Li et al. (2007) and Zhang

and Dixon (2001) regarding counsellors' multicultural competence and Lindsey and Kalafat (1998) regarding the preferred characteristics of adult helpers among ninth grade students in Midwestern, United States such as "non-judgemental", "makes self available" and "relates to teens", resonate with my participants' preferences of school counsellors' characteristics. My findings are also in accordance with Goldberg and Tidwell (1990), Tatar (2001), Kim et al. (2005), Kim et al. (2002), Constantine (2002), Wang and Kim (2010), Constantine et al. (2002), Yagil and Israelashvili (2003) who all indicated characteristics such as expert, attractive presentation, trustworthiness, kind, caring and sympathetic as indicators of counsellors' multicultural competencies and clients' satisfaction with their counselling. As a counsellor educator, I consider that these positive characteristics are indispensable for school counsellors in the post-modern era. They need to be presentable in terms of characteristics and approaches to cater to the diverse needs of students, as these are experienced as establishing the first rapport that leads to students' willingness to seek counselling.

The results of my study also indicate that there was an ambiguous perception of counsellors' roles among the school community. The counsellors were perceived by those not involved in counselling as playing multiple roles (counsellor cum discipline problem solver), psychologically inaccessible (nagging character, closed-minded, indifferent) and too busy (handling troubled students). These findings echo Constantine (2002), who mentioned characteristics such as "dual roles", "psychologically inaccessible" and being "too busy" as barriers to psychological help seeking. I discern that these situations occurred due to the conflict of values between the school system and the counsellors' roles. The way the school counsellors performed the service in this school was not aligned with the Ministry of Education Malaysia's general guidelines prescribed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, that all students should be involved in the aims and objectives of school guidance and counselling services. The demand of handling piles of troubled students' cases had considerably changed the counsellors' roles. Their positions were similar to Brooks-McNamara's (2006) conception of serving ancillary services and were often seen as peripheral (Aubrey, 1993) to the school community.

Due to the school counsellors' ambiguous role, they were vulnerable to receiving contradictory forms of criticism from the school community. They were obviously regarded as free floating additional help rather than professional entities by the school community. A huge gap had been created between the counsellors and the school community, as they reported having less power and being alienated from their own environment. There was no sense of understanding and respect from the teachers and school administrators towards the role of school counsellors. They reported experiencing "power distance"—a term espoused by Hofstede (2001) to indicate the differential in agency and control that occurs between them and the school community. Based on my observations and interviews, the counsellors managed to become advocates only at their micro level (with individual students), in which their involvement was limited to a specific group of students, notably referred clients and self-referred clients. They appeared unable to gain wider support within the school community. Hence, it was not a surprise that the school counsellors in my study abandoned the follow up programmes and the rights of well-behaved students. My findings are, thus, in accordance with Tatar (1998) and Burrello et al. (1993), who mentioned that the role of counsellors was shaped by the prevailing school ethos and culture. Therefore, the school system as a whole could provide an explanation for the school communities' different views and perceptions of them.

I consider that the nature and role of a school system could provide a solid explanation for how counsellors negotiate their duties. Handling a large number of referred clients contributed to the negative perception among the school community. I found that this resonates with Hornby (2003), who communicated that the attitudes towards counselling depend on the type of organisation in which the service takes place. He asserted that counselling in schools differs substantially from the way other professional counselling is handled. There are six differences between school counselling and the formal counselling handled by professional counsellors. They are the type of setting, the way the counselling is conducted, the types of clients involved, the types of counsellors, counselling strategies and the applicability of counselling theories in handling clients. Three differences that I consider significant to my findings relate to the types of clients, the strategies used to approach the clients and also the applicability of counselling theories. I would agree with Hornby's assertion that a large proportion

of clients in this school were referred by teachers as opposed to the self-referred clients in most other formal counselling scenarios. I discern that this resistance occurs because they do not initiate the seeking process by themselves and, hence, retaliate or are only partially involved in the activities organised. Moreover, the inappropriate approaches employed by the school counsellors that did not contextually address the needs of different types of students are parallel with Hornby's views that most of the counselling theories and counsellor training courses direct their focus at counselling adults rather than children or adolescents, who are by far considered different in terms of cognitive, emotional and social development. These factors had a significant impact on the approaches taken by the school counsellors as well as the students' acceptance towards the service. Hence, I would say that the approaches and strategies taken by the school counsellors can give considerable implications to the students' willingness to seek counselling. There should be other ways taken by the school counsellors to tackle these troublesome students as well as to help those uninvolved obtain more benefits from the service as discussed in the recommendation section.

**School guidance and counselling services were unappealing, ineffective and unlikely to suit the needs of the students and teachers.**

My study revealed that school guidance and counselling services were perceived to be unattractive to potential users and unresponsive to their needs. Teachers and students, particularly those not directly involved in one on one counselling, claimed to be getting little benefit from the service. For them, the service was not contextually tailored to their needs and preferences. The inadequacy of the physical counselling facilities such as an improper counselling room was considered to be among the hindrances to the students' interest. I was informed by the participants that the condition of the unit was not very therapeutic, dull and unattractive. These findings are in accordance with Riet and Knoetze's (2004) results indicating that besides the characteristics of counsellors, ethical considerations and psychological service quality are important for participants' positive attitudes towards the service. I relate disinterested attitudes to the concepts of "investment" and "agency" (McKay & Wong, 1996) and motivation (Kim, 2011). The participants, especially the students, were not particularly invested and motivated in



seeking help from counsellors or from the service, as they observed no potential benefits. It was no surprise to me that those participants other than the self-referred clients deliberately avoided the service, as they found nothing benefitted them. Thus, they had the power to ignore the service and seek alternatives that would bring them enjoyment. Furthermore, the approaches taken by the school counsellors in conducting counselling programmes seemed not to be aligned to the students' interests. Programmes such as motivation talks and study skills that mostly involved similar and routine approaches were regarded as less appealing and exciting. Moreover, the delivery and the content were too academic and did not stimulate the students' participation and interest. This was obviously far from the expectation of the participants, who wished for something exciting that could challenge their teenage spirits. This situation is in accordance with Rafidah and Noh's (2008) findings which mentioned that defensiveness in counselling occurs when the clients' values are held in a rigid, dogmatic or obsessive manner. All of these indicators are very crucial in fostering relationships, and failure to detect at least one of these may adversely affect the counselling process.

However, in explaining these situations, I observed that the counsellors were stuck between the demand to cater to the needs of the students and the school system. They were torn between providing the best service and fulfilling the demand of the school system to handling piles of cases of students in trouble. Furthermore, the administrative tasks like conducting relief classes (10 hours per week) with the least hours of conducting counselling sessions and programmes (8 hours per week) undoubtedly limited the counsellors' time to plan creative and attractive programmes. These findings agree with the qualitative study conducted by Kenneth, Rivera and Windle (2004), who indicated that the non-counselling duties such as supervision or paperwork tasks assigned by the school administrators to the school counsellors in one public community school in the US had consumed a lot of the counsellors' time and energy, and subsequently impeded their creativity and resourcefulness. My findings also support the quantitative results of Zuria and Jazimin (2008), who indicated that 191 Malaysian school counsellors spent a substantial part of their time on administrative activities (12 hour per week) and the least amount of their time conducting one on one counselling sessions (typically 2 hours per week). Hence, the counsellors' roles in

handling troublesome cases and the non-related counselling and guidance tasks such as involvement in relief classes and other administrative work could bring certain limitations to their capacities and capabilities in producing creative and interesting activities that meet different types of students' needs.

Based on the above discussions, I came to understand what had formed the school community's conflicting values towards counselling. Their values are interrelated and dependent on each other within the school community. I consider these to be among the systemic issues facing this school that seemed to affect the school's guidance and counselling services. Since disorder is considered a systemic problem, it takes a systemic effort to address the school's well-being. The next section will discuss the implications of this issue for theory, methodology and practice.

### **Main Findings and Systems Theory**

As I went through my research findings, I discerned that they could fit within Systems Theory Framework (STF), popularised by Patton and McMahon (2006). Although this theory is largely used in career counselling development (Patton & McMahon, 2006) and family therapy (Dallos & Draper, 2005), it is suggested that this framework be usefully positioned and utilised with any practice in other fields of study, particularly school counselling.

The findings of my study fit into the STF that emphasises the interconnectedness and the importance of wholes rather than parts. According to McLeod (2003), each part of a system plays certain roles and performs specific tasks within the system. Crucially, change in any one part affects the rest of the system. My study shows that the changing of students' values and attitudes carries implications for the rest of the school systems, including learning processes, as well as their values towards school guidance and counselling services. Similarly, the role of school counsellors in dealing with troubled students creates impressions which are detrimental to the general perception of counselling. In a similar situation, understanding the participants' contextual background is important. Their behaviour cannot be accounted for in a linear way, as

individuals actively participate in the creation of their own reality. Therefore, understanding the school structural system is important in comprehending the participants' values towards counselling services.

In addition, my findings indicate that the students' attitudes towards guidance and counselling services had been influenced by their personal values as well as their interactions with the school system. This finding fits with the basic assumption of the framework which emphasises that individual behaviour is best understood under the influence of the dynamics of the context in which the person is located. Patton and McMahon (2006) urged that individuals are considered dynamic, recursive and open systems in which they are subjected to many influences from inside as well as beyond their boundaries. Additionally, the relationship between the client and the counsellor in the counselling process can be regarded as a system in its own right. Both become elements of the system and influence each other.

The findings of my research can be appropriately placed in this framework, as it highlights the importance of understanding diversity in guidance and counselling processes. According to Patton and McMahon (2006), diversity is not only confined to the relationship between counsellor and clients of diverse backgrounds, but also covers their interactions within the system. This includes having knowledge and an understanding of school structural systems as well as the needs of different types of students.

I also agree with the suggestions proposed by McMahon and Patton (2002) that the STF can provide a map for counselling approaches because it accommodates not only the perspective of the traditional predictive theories, but also the positions of the more recent constructivist school counselling approaches. This theory emphasises that knowledge is formed through the process of co-construction between counsellor and clients. Based on my research findings, school counsellors had largely been using traditional ways of approaching clients, mostly by means of referral methods by teachers. Meaning-making as well as collaborative processes were rarely practised between students. Affirming this approach will probably enhance the counsellors' contributions to their clients.

## **Implications for Practice**

### **Viewing school guidance and counselling services as a systemic process.**

My research has merely uncovered a map on which we can begin a journey towards improving school counselling in this particular school as well as beyond to where the findings may be of relevance to practitioners. Embracing systems theory as a framework for understanding human beings has indeed allowed my findings to be of relevance to others, as it views human beings as dynamic, open system and recursive. These principles that consider individual as both a system and subsystem of a broader contextual system permits the transfer of human knowledge as it supports the applicability of influence from inside and beyond the boundaries of the system. Moreover, this framework that operates within the constructivist and social constructionist theories of human knowledge could have wider applications to the readers as it considers the holistic view of human's interactions within a micro and macro understandings.

I learned through this research that the effort to understand counselling is not only established between the client and counsellor but also with the school system. I acknowledge that throughout recent history, emphasis has been placed largely by school guidance and counselling in Malaysia as well as across the globe on the importance of individualising problems as a response to individual suffering and individual needs. However, as we are now living in a complex social system, there is a need to understand school counselling on a systemic level (Low, 2009). According to McLeod (2003, p. 190), there is a need to understand the principles by which systems operate and the types of intervention that can bring about change on a systemic level. He stressed that the organisational factors characterised by the type of agency or setting, and the way it is organised, may have an impact on many aspects of counselling. Furthermore, Anderson Goolishian, Pulliam, and Winderman(1986) mentioned that “ problems are not the result of an objective defect that exists within or between individuals, but rather, the distinction of the system of treatment of concern is defined by those who share in the communication that defines the problem” (p. 118). Hence, I consider having a good understanding of the school ethos and systems as essential for all counsellors. In this

vein, I acknowledge Bunce and Willower's (2001) view that the examination of organisational values, beliefs and practices in relation to professional values, beliefs and training may inform capacity building for counsellors. I learned from them that the process of providing effective counselling strategies involves counsellors' self-reflexivity (Strous, 2006). Counsellors need to examine their worldviews and, at the same time, try to understand others and have the awareness that they are not only working with their clients but with systems. Proactive efforts must be taken by school counsellors to resolve this issue. A holistic perspective enables individuals to recognise the themes and interconnectedness among various behaviours (Jackson & Meadows, 1991).

Immersing myself in the research process made me understand the influence of a system on the values and attitudes of human beings. I consider that it is about time for guidance and counselling services to enhance their quality and to regain support from the school community by strengthening their roles. This is in accordance with McLeod (2003), who encouraged counsellors to play a more active part in facilitating organisational change. This involves the act of educating the school community about the role of counselling as well as establishing a viable relationship with this community. In the context of the researched school, more outreach promotions can be conducted to spread awareness about the service. Various efforts need to be made to demystify the actual meaning of guidance and counselling. I consider that this can be done by establishing collaboration with the school community (Clark & Breman, 2009) especially teachers and school administrators, in conducting programmes. Once counsellors have gained acceptance and respect in the staffroom, they can then fulfil a more specific counselling role. I am interested in the idea suggested by Akos (2005) that school counselling requires a unique design and responsive developmental programmes to cater to the needs of the school community. In this context, I would suggest that counsellors and the school community find a better way to restore a positive relationship and a supportive environment within the school community. Establishing advisory programmes and teaming, for example, could help improve teacher-counsellor-student relationships, promote social and emotional development as well as build feelings of belonging and caring.

## **Implications for Methodology**

Engaging myself in qualitative research helped me understand the impact of social constructivism/constructionism in conducting research in the counselling field. It helped me appreciate others' knowledge and their contextual situations. My experience of engaging with students and the school community made me empathise with their situations and their lives at school. Mingling with school counsellors for almost three months made me understand the challenges that they faced in dealing with students and the school community. Furthermore, I came to understand the participants' values of the service. In this respect, I agreed with Rudes and Guterman (2007) and Erikson (2007) that the application of this approach is essential, as it provides alternative ways of understanding clients' experiences. This approach regards clients or research participants as actively engaged in the meaning-making process. Both are collaboratively involved as equal partners.

Furthermore, constructivism/constructionism implies respect, adopting multiple perspectives, humility, willingness to reconstruct meaning and recognition that there are no "essential" counselling truths or theories that apply to all clients in all circumstances (Sexton, 1997). Employing a constructivist philosophy according to Granvold (1996) promotes the importance of the healthy characteristics of a relationship, such as acceptance, understanding, trust and caring, where the counsellor and clients involve themselves in the process of constructing and reconstructing meaning, considered important through processes such as information sharing, interpretation, supportiveness, encouragement, structuring and challenge. According to Peavy (1998), since this process is considered less directive, it appreciates clients in the sense that it opens up the possibility of providing equal rights for them to facilitate, explore and structure their way of life. Indeed, my interaction with the participants, especially the students, helped me to challenge my own assumptions and to maintain a respectful and open approach in which I not only learned about their situation, but also learned from them. Adopting a social constructionist position slowly diminished my traditional conceptions of myself (Rudes & Guterman, 2007) that largely emphasised cognitive processes. Moreover, the findings of my research convey the power of qualitative research in providing insightful perspectives, of looking at human beings from different angles. I learned that realities

are co-constructed in relationships, and individuals convey their personality and identity in the context of human interchange. Indeed, as a counselling educator, I was moved by this conception.

I found that the narrative ethnographic case study approach was fruitful in understanding the participants' aspect of life in their particular cultural groups (Arnault, 2009). In this vein, I agree with Peavy (1992), who advocated the use of the term "fruitfulness" as opposed to "outcomes" in counselling processes. The co-construction advocated by the in-depth interview process ultimately changed the way I looked into their lives. I began to understand their worldviews. In the cases of Aziz and Govindasamy, who were referred clients, they taught me the importance of these conceptions: relationship, agency, meaning-making and negotiation (Peavy, 1992). I felt attached to the participants, especially the referred clients. They did not hesitate to share their personal stories with an outsider like me. At the same time, I was contented when they displayed self-empowerment (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009) including assertiveness, autonomy and personal and social responsibility upon obtaining counselling services. They proudly realised the beauty of counselling and were appreciative of the honesty displayed by the school counsellors. The insights that they obtained re-orientated their lives. They started to see their lives in a more meaningful and manageable way.

Immersion in qualitative research taught me to become a more sensitive person. This is because it emphasises characteristics such as keen observation, active listening, relating and interpreting (Berrios & Lucca, 2006). Listening to the participants' stories allowed me to learn about their lives, as well as to interact with them on a personal level. The process helped me facilitate a trusting relationship and respect. This is indeed valuable for me, not only to become an expert qualitative researcher, but also to help me enhance my capabilities as an educator in a helping profession.

The findings of the research also taught me that apart from understanding our worldviews, it is important to have a balanced worldview of others' differences. This includes our ability to have a clear understanding of the different kinds of persons that we deal with. When I reflected on my experiences in conducting the interviews and

counselling sessions, I realised that there was inconsistency and dissonance in my views related to the participants. However, I learned to suspend my assumptions. I let them convey their own understanding. Hence, respecting the participants' knowledge and worldviews, according to Shigematsu (2002), is considered a vital element that could affect counsellors' planning and orientation of the service. Cultural values towards school guidance and counselling may not be due to some inherent deficits but to systemic forces such as stigma, labelling and prejudice. In other words, the system is to be blamed, not the person.

I consider that much effort is needed to be involved in the process of understanding students' resistance towards counselling and in fulfilling their needs. Acknowledging their views and practising an open-minded approach would facilitate a valuable understanding of the situation. Pederson (1997, p. 16) described balance as "a tolerance for inconsistency and dissonance". In addition, Bemak and Hanna (1998) placed their emphasis on the importance of having awareness of the impact of the socioeconomic and political aspects of the client. In the context of my research, I found that it is important to understand a school community's worldviews, values and contextual backgrounds before proposing any remedies for the situation. The same also goes to school counsellors in this school and other settings where the similar dynamics may be operating. In the process of understanding students, important issues such as their worldviews, values and their backgrounds must be taken into account. There should be a balance on the part of the school counsellors between applying their own theoretical approach and meeting the needs of the students.

The next few sections discuss recommendations for various systems evolve around the school. I consider this as crucial considering the importance of looking into the 'whole' system as suggested by the principles of systems theory.

### **Recommendations for School Counsellors**

From the research, I learned that working in the system requires counsellors to adapt to perpetually changing situations ahead of them. As the world is changing, the needs of



clients are also evolving. I consider having good preparation to be important for school counsellors in order to accommodate the ever changing world and its challenges. This might include having a preparation to disaffiliate with old theoretical and intervention constructs that were effective in the past, but are becoming outdated. I agree with Shigematsu (2002), Alberta and Wood (2009), Henkelman and Paulson (2006) that involvement in multicultural counselling requires more than a set body of knowledge or techniques. The most important thing is our consciousness, wisdom and skills to see and understand each of the persons as unique beings, deeply flavoured by particular cultural influences. There is no absolute truth in addressing clients. The way we deal with them is according to their uniqueness in their sense of self and interaction with their social context (Arredondo, Tovar-Blank & Parham, 2008).

My research also suggests the importance of school counsellors in catering to the needs of different types of students at a particular life stage. I am interested in the idea of Tatar (2001), who suggested the importance of working on professional self-presentation to adolescents, and the rearrangement of counselling services in forms that best fit the adolescents' perspectives and needs. This includes the process of approaching them as well as establishing a relationship with them. According to Tatar (2001), among the difficulties facing school counsellors who work with adolescents include the problem of establishing a relationship, gaining their confidence and belief to seek counselling and the counsellors' openness to cultural differences. Hence, generation gaps, although regarded as a barrier, should be treated as a strength that complements the counsellors' knowledge and capacities. In addition, Shechtman, Hiradin and Zina (2003) recommended conducting homogenous group counselling among students, as it is considered effective in preventing social stigma in collectivistic societies. Besides gaining experience, adolescents can engage in the group work process (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2006) and hence allowing for "therapeutic factors such as cohesion and universality" (Paisle & Milsom, 2006, p. 14). I tend to agree with them, as I did experience the same issue when I handled the group interviews with certain group of students. They seemed comfortable speaking up about issues when I placed them in a group. Additionally, group counselling can provide simulation for practising coping skills, particularly for those who have been marginalised in the school community, and hence, this would increase their self-esteem. Besides that, McLeod

(1999) mentioned that the use of traditional approaches could be combined with narrative approaches that emphasise the importance of meaning-making and the co-construction of knowledge between the counsellor and client. The use of stories in individual counselling, for example, can be useful for understanding an individual's patterns and life themes and the connections between previous events in life.

In addressing the school counselling situation, I recognised that improvements need to be made in terms of the counsellors' orientation in this school. I was interested in the idea generated by Chapman (2003) about the shift from viewing the process of learning from linear, sequential, generalisable and mechanistic to a more flexible learning to learn. I discern that it is important for counsellors to keep pace with current trends and changes in students' values and attitudes. It is vital for them to adapt themselves to students of different levels and backgrounds and their changing situations. An optimum environment that emphasises direct experience in context can be channelled and nurtured, where students are encouraged to collaborate and participate actively in the learning process by becoming more self-directed in meaning-making and in managing their lives.

Besides enhancing learning orientation, the promotion of teams and networks is also important in the learning environment (Paisle & Milsom, 2006). I am inclined to agree with Bemak and Hanna (1998) that working in isolation is no longer effective in this post-modern era. Students can be taught the importance of creating a flexible network workforce where they can be regarded as important entities in the school community. In this vein, the views and opinions of students and those who are most affected can be considered useful information and fruitful insight to the school's level of intervention (Toporek, Lewis, & Crether, 2009). Hence, it is advisable for school counsellors to seek views from students and the school community regarding suitable programmes that fit their interests. This will help accelerate the students' acceptance and privilege their positions in school. Furthermore, teamwork can provide opportunities for professional exchange, development and enrichment (Sliwka, 2003). It is hoped that fostering this awareness can contribute to a better quality of life including compassion, empathy, social action and collaborative problem solving within the greater community. Hence, counsellors must mediate not only with clients but also with the school system.

In addressing these issues, I view that ensuring a consistently positive evaluation of counselling programmes is crucial. This is to ensure the relevancy and adequacy of the programmes to the students and the school community. I am interested in Lapan's (2001) suggestion that school counsellors need to be active in reflecting on their current approaches and practices in order to enable the continued growth of this profession. He suggested six types of evaluation which include improvement to counsellors' roles and functions, amount of counsellors' time designated for the benefit of students, effectiveness of counselling programmes that meet the school's needs, the centrality of the programmes within the school, partnership and effective advocacies with local communities and beyond. According to him, these types of evaluation should take into account the importance of the school environment in shaping and developing the students' learning processes. This effort would undoubtedly inform the counsellors of the best way to design appropriate programmes that accommodate different types of students' needs and preferences. Furthermore, the use of creative delivery through the guidance programmes can provide a more inclusive learning experience for students.

### **Recommendations for the School**

Nevertheless, I consider that the effort towards school counselling improvement is not the school counsellors' journey alone. In fact, improvement will depend on systemic collaboration. Each and every party in the school system will need to appreciate that the service is meant for all, and for the betterment of all students and the school community. In dealing with this issue, I discern that the school plays an important role in restoring the values of students towards the school as well as towards guidance and counselling services. Various strategies can be adopted by the school administration to address this problem. In bringing the students back to the school, I found the results from Tabane and Human-Vogel (2010) to be engaging in the sense that they provided very useful suggestions for fostering a successful school environment. They consisted of the following characteristics: a welcoming space, belonging, respect, security, equality in socialisation, tender loving care, motivation and freedom. I envisage that that this school can benefit from these positive characteristics. In order to develop a welcoming

space, I discern that practising humanistic approach in addressing the students is essential. The most important thing is that the students feel that they are cared and respected for their existence in school. School should not be regarded as a mere place for exercising power and discipline over students, but a constructive space in which to exchange views and opinions.

Additionally, I consider that the involvement of school administrators, particularly the effort of the school principal, is essential to restoring the students' and school community's beliefs and values towards guidance and counselling services. Most importantly, they need to understand that counsellors are overworked. Promoting a service without capacity may add to the sense of alienation. Perhaps more effective counselling programmes should be the starting point. In this situation, group counselling or creative group work (Ward, 2006; Veach & Gladding, 2006) would be more effective in tackling the different needs of students as opposed to individual and personal coaching. Massive awareness of counselling can be introduced to educate pupils and the school community on the actual concept, role and status of counselling. It is hoped that this can lessen the stigma among them. Additionally, expanding the availability of services through supporting the use of counselling skills for teachers and establishing peer counselling (Akos, Mack & Dunaway, 2006) by pupils could benefit the school. Students should not be regarded as mere clients. Most importantly, they are also great contributors to the service. Their reservations and hesitations towards the service cannot be ignored; rather, they can be treated as benchmarks that set the starting point for the betterment of the service.

### **Recommendations for Counsellor Educators**

It is undeniable that the effort of bringing students towards the service needs to begin from the grass roots, starting at the counsellor educators' level. As a counsellor educator myself, I admit that the current guidance and counselling curriculum system at the university level is rather obsolete and does not meet the contextual demands of current students' situations. The emphasis on assessments and the act of objectifying clients as individual beings by neglecting their situational factors constrains the service.

Mere theories and approaches from textbooks seem to be inadequate in addressing the ever changing behaviours of today's adolescents. In this vein, the current findings of the research are regarded as beneficial for counsellor educators to keep themselves abreast with current information and knowledge. Moreover, exchanging information and engaging in active dialogues and collaborative programmes with school counsellors could provide a solid ground for counsellor educators to convey information to counsellor trainees. In this way, an active link between research and practice is suggested and encouraged. I would suggest introducing more research training and collaboration between schools and universities. This could promote a research culture between both parties, and hence, determine a possible way to address the needs of students and the school community towards the service, thus bridging the gap between the university level and the school setting.

As a counsellor educator, it is also imperative for me to inspire and motivate trainee counsellors through effective learning. I am interested in the idea of McGettrick (2005, p. 14) about the importance of emotional engagement in the learning process. This encourages educators to promote critical curiosity and thought among students, develop resilient lifelong learners, encourage reflection and promote creativity and inventiveness. I discern that these efforts could be disseminated through hands-on activities such as community projects with neighbouring schools, technology-based programmes that use applications such as blogs, web pages or e-counselling services. This would help accelerate pupils' interest as well as help to instil a spirit of responsibility and accountability among university students towards their future career.

It is also hoped that this research will motivate school counsellors as well as counsellor educators to actively involve themselves in researching their own practice, especially in their own settings. This effort would give them the chance to let their clients and community be involved in doing research simultaneously. Dialogues and interactions with clients would enable them to take a more active role, becoming co-researchers in a collaborative and reciprocal relationship with counsellors. For example, they can develop a community of practice (CoP) using online groups. This would help accelerate better use of counselling services in a larger context. Furthermore, this

practice would help extend the service to all students and, thus, eliminate public and self-stigma among them.

### **Recommendations for Counsellor Trainees**

I learned through this study that there should be awareness among counsellor trainees who are going to embark on the profession, to prepare them to face these challenges and opportunities. Having a deeper understanding of oneself as well as knowledge about the profession is not sufficient. Most importantly, it is prudent for them to realise that they will be working with individuals and groups within the context of a system. Thus, preparation to face the system and its challenges needs to be meticulously taken into account in a revised curriculum for counselling training.

I am interested in the suggestions given by McGettrick (2005, p. 14) for developing curriculum that promotes a “values-orientated model that gives concern for the emotional aspects of educational and personal development”. Besides providing the prospective counsellor a sense of engagement in his or her learning, it also promotes him or her being cognizant and responsive to the needs of students and the community in the contextual system. In addition, inculcating a sense of curiosity for conducting research within the school community is essential. This will help students overcome issues within their local context and address the needs of the school community in a more responsive and effective way.

Moreover, I discern that knowledge about building a collaborative relationship with the school community and facing the ever challenging types of adolescents are also vital. Enhancing curiosity about developing research skills within the school community is essential, as this will help overcome issues within the local context as well as address the needs of the school community in a more responsive and effective way.

### **Recommendations for the Ministry of Education Malaysia**

I acknowledge that school guidance and counselling services would not achieve success in their implementation without the support of and cooperation from the government,

such as the Ministry of Education as well as the Ministry of Higher Education. I would like my findings to be regarded as significant not only to academics but also to the practitioners and policy makers in the field of counselling. Therefore, it would be enlightening if the two ministries could address these issues in order to enhance the effectiveness and understanding of the school community and public towards the school as well as counselling services.

As the number of students and physical resources is considered the greatest hindrance to the school community, it is advisable for the Ministry to take these aspects into consideration. I would recommend that this school have a smaller number of students based on its capacity and resources. This is to ensure proper monitoring, thus enhancing the teacher-student relationships as well as inculcating positive values towards counselling services. In addition, the appropriate distribution of counsellors' time and workloads that meet the needs of the school is also vital, as this would affect the quality of the school's counselling services. I recommend that counsellors be given greater autonomy to address their roles and tasks flexibly, according to the contextual needs of the school. Relief classes conducted by counsellors could be replaced with guidance classes. These would help counsellors to disseminate their roles and services in a more diverse and transparent way.

Furthermore, there should be ways to foster a sense of understanding towards the school counsellors' roles and functions in this school as well as other school settings. I would suggest teaching counselling skills to all teacher trainees in every teacher training institution as well as exposing in-service teachers and administrators to the basic knowledge of counselling skills. This could be conducted by having collaborative programmes with the counsellor; thus, it would help the counsellors deal with referral issues as well as assist teachers to communicate effectively with parents. Additionally, it is recommended that the government, with the help of the Ministry of Education Malaysia, promote the service at the national level in order to create awareness, especially among students and their parents, about the importance of the service with respect to their self-development.

## **Contributions to Knowledge**

I am personally delighted that the findings of my study are able to contribute to the body of knowledge, particularly in the area of school guidance and counselling as well as multicultural counselling in general. The distinguishing feature of my study is that the students' attitudes towards school guidance and counselling services are best understood within the systemic process. No qualitative study so far within school counselling research in Malaysia has addressed the importance of the systemic process in understanding cultural values and attitudes towards school guidance and counselling. According to McLeod (2003), systems ideas can challenge mainstream approaches which emphasise understanding problems at the level of the individual and provide an alternative way of seeing the person as part of a system. I consider that the time for all of us to see individuals through a wider lens and guide them by means of systemic processes is overdue.

Doing this kind of study and interpretation has indeed challenged mainstream ways of thinking in the research discipline. This is because most of the studies so far were done quantitatively, without deeply concentrating on participants' contextual situations. I personally learned that conducting this research within a qualitative research paradigm would offer a better understanding of human development. Previously, school counselling services, as well as training programmes, were significantly influenced and supported by positivism and, thus, by quantification and experimentation. The use of qualitative research opens up new perspectives and understandings of various contributions to school communities. McLeod (2001), Nugent (2000) and Berrios and Lucca (2006) mentioned that little attention had been given to qualitative research conducted within this paradigm. Therefore, the emphasis of my study that demonstrates the application of the narrative ethnographic case study approach is in line with the suggestions previously mentioned. Furthermore, utilising this approach provided me with an insightful understanding of these two conceptions of culture: big culture proposed by the "realist" and small culture by the post-modernist (Cunliffe, 2010). I learned that the latter conception of culture enabled me to pay more due respect and sensitivity to the historical, political, economic and cultural aspects of my participants,



as their micro social interactions were studied. Thus, this made the study valuable for understanding the participants' values and attitudes within the respective school.

My study is also distinctive as it employed a constant comparative method derived from the principles of constructivist grounded theory. Thus far, none of the research on school counselling in Malaysia has addressed the issue using this approach, making my research valuable and contributory to the field, particularly in school counselling. This method helped me illustrate the analytical description of the issue and enabled me to observe and compare the issue from micro and macro level perspectives. I am hoping that these tiny qualitative research findings may start to counter the scarcity of qualitative research on this profession, particularly in Malaysia.

### **Limitations**

While the research makes important strides in understanding students' cultural values and attitudes towards school guidance and counselling within the systemic process, there are limitations that I can deduce with respect to the nature of the study, interview content and ethnographic data presentation.

I acknowledge that my findings were derived from a case study that involved small scale research of one secondary school. Hence, the phenomenon would only represent the setting in which I conducted this research, and thus, it is contextually specific. This limits the formal generalisability of these findings; however, they may be transferable where the reader considers them applicable (Lichtman, 2010, p.228).

My interview content was also limited by the constraints of time. I admit to a time limitation in conducting the interviews with the participants. This was due to their hectic schedules in school, where, on average, I only managed to interview a participant for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour; hence, the information obtained was bound by that particular time. In addition, I could only establish narrative interviewing with referred clients and school counsellors.

As a novice narrative ethnographer, I acknowledge the limitation of my role as a researcher in conducting this research. I admit that it was difficult for me to establish a close relationship with the teachers as well as the school counsellors in the first instance. This was due to my lack of communication skills and self-presentation. However, I regard the limitations that I faced as a great lesson for me to improve these aspects. Recognising these constraints was the starting point of my appreciation of the experience of my participants.

There is also room for improvement in terms of narrative ethnographic data presentation. As a novice ethnographer, it was not easy to present an ethnographic narrative piece of writing. During the initial phase of writing, I struggled to construct the storyline. I had difficulty discerning the bigger picture embedded in the participants' stories as well as matching their stories with my field notes. In addition, I had problems finding a balance in representing my own story and those of the participants. It was also quite challenging for me to juggle literary and academic pursuits. I noticed that my writing was mostly presented in hurriedly composed sentences. This was due to my first experience venturing into creative writing and using evocative language. I acknowledge Cunliffe (2010, p. 227), who mentioned the following: "It takes skill to write good ethnographies that convey a sense of the richness and intricacy of the culture being studied." Indeed, it requires a great deal of perseverance. However, I agree with Bridges (2006, p. 102) that this kind of writing offered a kind of therapeutic experience. It made me more aware of my practices as well as my experiences with the research participants.

### **Avenue for Further Work**

As I involved myself in this research, I came to understand that school guidance and counselling is not considered a standalone service. Instead, it is embedded in a system. Further studies could include other parties in a higher level system, particularly the Education Planning and Research Department (EPRD) of the Ministry of Education. As the policy makers at the highest level of the education system, I consider their views to

be vital to understanding the status as well as the future plans for school guidance and counselling development in Malaysian schools.

I discern that the same issue can also be conducted in different locations, for example, in the inner cities; with the large populations that have the best practices of counselling. This will provide a comparative understanding of how counselling services are handled.

I envisage that there are number of issues that can be conducted within this area using the narrative ethnographic case studies approach. There is a need to explore students' and counsellors' stories about the current counselling skills being practiced by school counsellors. This would illuminate the clients' views about the relevancy of the approaches being adopted.

Another avenue for further study that I regard as essential and worth looking at is the integration of technology in the process of implementing guidance and counselling services. As we are now living in an era of globalisation and open space, there is a need for more studies to be conducted to explore the school community's readiness to use technology as a tool to enhance guidance and counselling services. The application of technology, such as e-counselling or any virtual guidance, as a tool for communication could be worthy of exploration in order to find alternative ways for students to seek help from counsellors. Furthermore, their views would be considered useful in understanding how counselling and guidance services could be improved.

I hope that my findings will shed some light on the cultural values towards school guidance and counselling and others' expectations towards the service. I also hope that my suggestions and recommendations will be helpful for school counselling improvement. This will give better preparation not only to counsellor trainees embarking upon school counselling professions, but also to counsellor educators who juggle their time in teaching and conducting research in school counselling.

## **Conclusion**

The findings emphasise the importance of understanding guidance and counselling services within the systemic process. This involves understanding and negotiating between counsellors and school communities such as students, teachers, administrators and the whole practice of the school cultural system. It is in accordance with Jackson and Meadow (1991), who stated that “viewing culture from this holistic perspective facilitates culturally relevant meanings to explaining behaviours, thus placing one at a greater advantage for understanding behavioural and attitudinal differences” (p. 72). My study has indeed provided a framework for a clear understanding of the participants’ experiences, as it views them from the perspective of the deep structure of culture. I assert that counsellors are no longer seen as the sole providers of knowledge and skills. Instead, they are part of a collaboration that occurs within the school system. In order to make a systemic change in the education system, all critical players in the school setting including school counsellors need to be involved in the school reform process.

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## Appendix 1: Approval letter from EPRD (The Education Planning and Research Department)



BAGIAN PERANCANGAN DAN PENYELIDIKAN DASAR PENDIDIKAN  
KEMENTERIAN PELAJARAN MALAYSIA  
ARAS 1-4, BLOK E 6  
KOMPLEKS KERAJAAN PARLI  
PUSAT PENTADBIRAN KERAJAAN PERSEKUTUAN  
62604 PUTRAJAYA.

Telefon: 03-88046591  
Faks : 03-8884665/9

Ref. Kami : KP(BPPDP)603/011/31d 9(45)  
Tarikh : 25 Ogos 2008

Ketua Pengarah  
Seksyen Ekonomi Makro  
Unit Perancangan Ekonomi  
Jabatan Perdana Menteri  
Blok B5 Aras 4  
Kompleks Jabatan Perdana Menteri  
Pusat Pentadbiran Kerajaan Persekutuan  
62502 PUTRAJAYA  
(u.p. Pn. Munirah Bt. Abd. Manan)

Puan,

**Pemohonan Untuk Menjalankan Penyelidikan di Malaysia**  
**MURUL AIN MOHD DAUD**

Dengan hormatnya saya merujuk kepada perkara di atas.

2. Adalah saya diarahkan memaklumkan bahawa Bahagian ini tidak mempunyai apa-apa halangan dan menyokong cadangan yang dikemukakan oleh penyelidik berkenaan untuk membolehkan menjalankan penyelidikan :

**" Exploring The Influence Of Cultural Values In Seeking Counseling Among Secondary School Students In Malaysia "**

3. Bersama-sama ini disertakan ulasan Bahagian ini ke atas cadangan penyelidikan yang dikemukakan.

Sekian dimaklumkan, terima kasih.

**" BERKHIDMAT UNTUK NEGARA "**

Saya yang menurut perintah,

**(ZALINA BINTI AHMAD ZAINUDDIN)**

Penolong Pengarah  
Bahagian Perancangan dan Penyelidikan Dasar Pendidikan  
d.p. Ketua Setiausaha  
Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia

## Appendix 2: Approval letter from EPRD (The Education Planning and Research Department) cont.

### REVIEW OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL ULASAN TENTANG CADANGAN KAJIAN

Researcher's Name/ Nama Penyelidik : Nurul Ain Mohd Daud

Research/ Kajian: ☒ Ph.D/ Kedoktoran

☐ Masters/ Sarjana

Name of Institution/ Nama Institusi : University of Bristol  
United Kingdom

Research Title/ Tajuk Kajian : Exploring The Influence Of Cultural Values In Seeking Counseling Among Secondary School Students In Malaysia

- a) Views concerning the research proposal:  
Setelah membaca cadangan kajian seperti yang dinyatakan di atas, pandangan terhadap cadangan kajian adalah seperti berikut:

- i) Area of study/ Bidang yang akan dikaji:

☒ Suitable/Sesuai ☐ Not Suitable/Tidak Sesuai

The researcher would like to examine the extent in which cultural values affect the decision to seek counseling and the relationship between the interplay of this 'culture – counseling seeking' in three different races; the Malay, Chinese and Indian.

- ii) Research location identified/Kawasan kajian yang telah dikenal pasti:

☒ Suitable/Sesuai ☐ Not Suitable/Tidak Sesuai

☐ Not Identified/Tidak Pasti

In a multi racial public secondary school situated in the north east region in the state of Perak.

- iii) Benefits of the research or its importance to the Ministry Of Education Malaysia

☒ Benefit/Faedah ☐ No benefits/Tidak Berfaedah

☐ Not Identified/Tidak Pasti

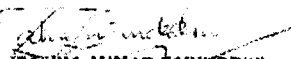
Findings of this study will provide the information required by the School Division of the Ministry of Education in order to improve on the counseling programme or activities in schools.

- b) Suggestions made by EPRD, Ministry of Education, Malaysia/ Cadangan BPPDP, Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia:

☒ Approved/Diluluskan ☐ Approved with conditions/Diluluskan dengan beryarat

☐ Not Approved/Tidak diluluskan

This Division does not have any objections to allow this researcher to conduct research in educational institutions under the Ministry of Education, Malaysia./ Bahagian ini tidak mempunyai apa-apa halangan untuk membolehkan penyelidik ini menjalankan kajian di institusi pendidikan di bawah Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia.

  
(ZALINA AHMAD ZAINUDDIN)  
Research and Evaluation Sector  
Educational Research and Planning Division  
Ministry of Education, Malaysia  
Date: 21 August 2008

### Appendix 3: Support letter from supervisor (University of Bristol)



Graduate School of Education  
35 Berkeley Square  
Bristol BS8 1JA  
Telephone: +44 (0)117 928 9000  
Facsimile: +44 (0)117 925 5412  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/education>

Direct line: 0117-3374435  
Direct fax: 0117-925-5412  
Email: [tim.bond@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:tim.bond@bristol.ac.uk)

27<sup>th</sup> January 2009

Registrar,  
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris,  
Tanjong Malim,  
35900,  
Perak, Malaysia.  
(u.p : Unit Cuti Belajar)

Dear Sir,

#### Request for support in Data collection

May this letter find you in your best of health and high personal esteem.

I am writing to request that you support in any way the request of Nurul Ain Mohd Daud to carry out her PhD research back in Malaysia.

Nurul's study is pertaining to an exploration of the influence of cultural values in seeking counselling among secondary school students in Malaysia. She will be conducting her research in two secondary schools in Rawang and Tanjong Malim, Malaysia.

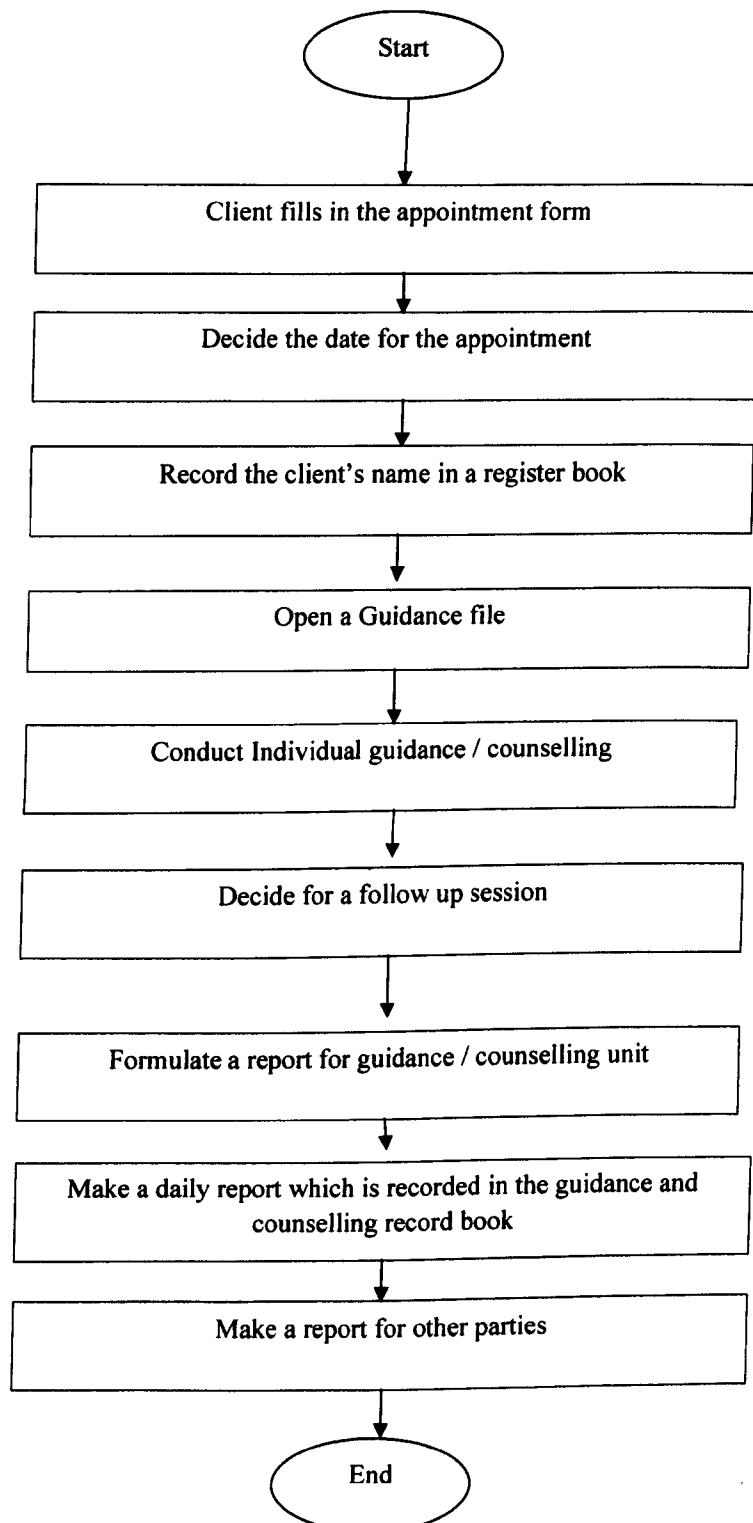
Nurul has worked hard on her research training programme over the past year and, as her supervisor, I am confident she will carry out the proposed research in a proper and timely manner.

Yours faithfully,

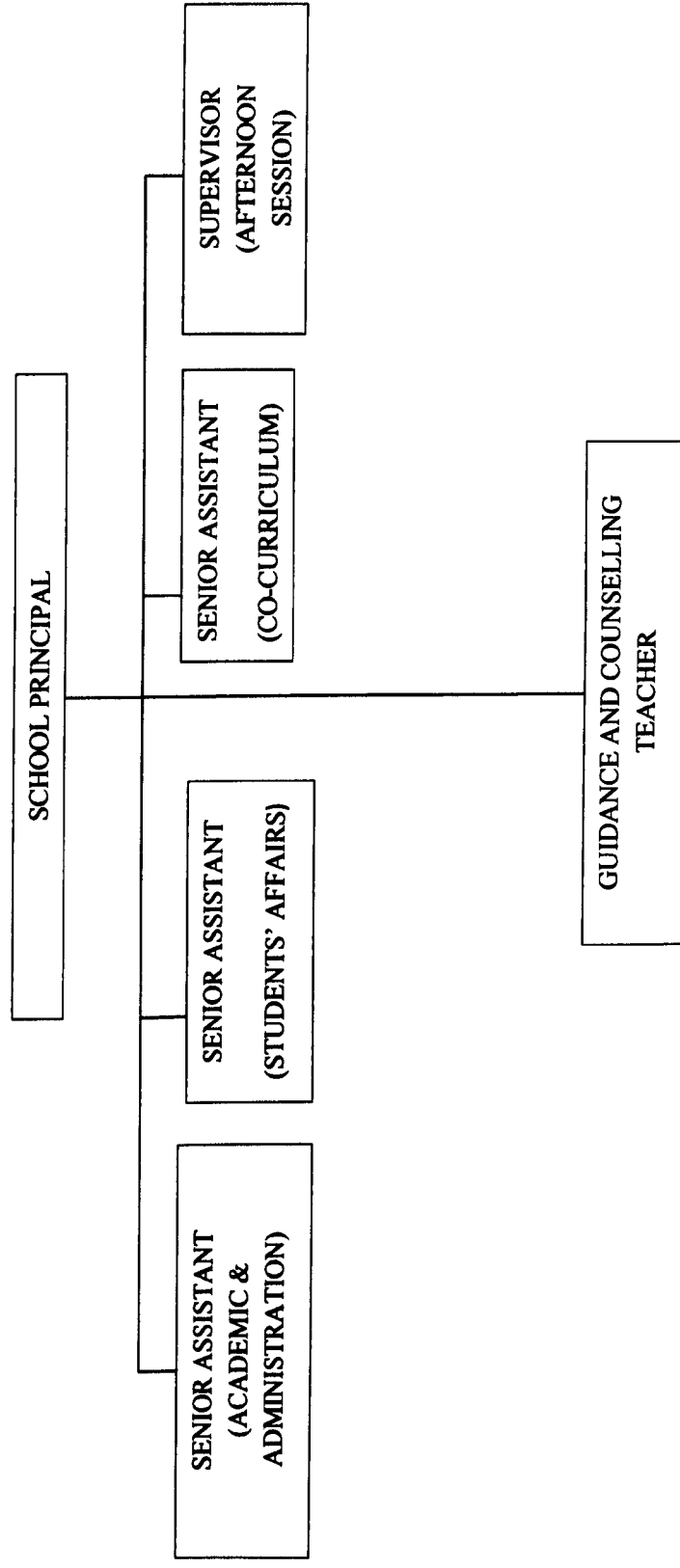
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T. Bond".

Professor Tim Bond  
Head of Department

**Appendix 4: Flow chart of guidance and counselling conducted by guidance and counselling unit in secondary schools in Malaysia (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2009)**



**Appendix 5: Organisational chart indicating a position of full time school counsellor in secondary schools in Malaysia (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2009)**





## Appendix 6: School Grades and education structure in Malaysia (Fatimah, 1984)

Level/ Grade	Typical Age
Preschool	
Preschool playgroup	3-4
Kindergarten	4-6
Primary School	
Standard 1	6-7
Standard 2	7-8
Standard 3	8-9
Standard 4	9-10
Standard 5	10-11
Standard 6	11-12
Secondary School	
Lower Secondary Education	
Form 1	12 -13
Form 2	13-14
Form 3 (PMR examination)	14-15
Upper secondary school	
Form 4	15-16
Form 5 (SPM examination)	17-18
Post-secondary education	
Tertiary education (college or university)	19 – 24 + (Age varies)
Upper six, Lower Six/ college/ pre-university/ university level.	

## **Education structure in Malaysia**

The management and structure of education in Malaysia is centralised with four district hierarchical levels namely federal, state, district and school. The institutions representing these four levels are the Ministry of Education, the State Education Departments, the District Education Offices and schools. The educational administration at the Federal level is responsible for the implementation of educational policies and the administration of the education system. Educational Administration at the State level is responsible to coordinate and monitor the implementation of national education programmes, projects and activities as well as providing feedback to central Agency for overall planning. Educational administration at the District level serves as an effective link between the school and the State Education Department. The education administration at the school level leads by the school principle or headmaster who is both the administrative and instructional leader in the school. He is assisted by a Senior Assistant and a Head of Student Affairs. Generally, the Senior Assistant assists in administrative aspects of school organisations such as managing school funds, accounts and resources, planning the timetable and schemes of work for teachers. The head of Students Affairs assists matters related to student welfare such as textbooks, loans, disciplines, student health and nutrition. Besides these, he attends to complaints and liaises with parents and the community on matters relating to student well-being. For effective coordination of teaching and learning of the various subjects taught in schools, a senior teacher is appointed as the head or key resource teacher for each subject. Schools with double sessions have afternoon supervisors who assist school heads in supervising the daily administrative and instructional activities in schools. Besides that, all school in Malaysia have Parent-Teacher Association as to facilitate parental participation in school (The Development of Education, National Report of Malaysia, Ministry of Education, and 31st July 2004).

The formal school education in Malaysia is sub-divided into 6-3-2-2 levels consisting of six years of primary schooling, three years of lower secondary, two years of upper secondary education and two years of pre-university education. In 2002, Ministry of Education has amended the Education Act 1996 which regulates the provision of preschool, primary and secondary education and made the implementation of

compulsory education at primary school level in 2003 (Ministry Of Education,2004). I consider this implementation as in line with the government policy to provide continuous improvement for the educational well being among Malaysians.

### **Primary school education**

The primary education system is divided into the national schools (Sekolah Kebangsaan or SK) and Vernacular or national type schools (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan or SJK). The medium of instruction in the SKs is Malay while Chinese and Indian vernacular school conduct classes in Mandarin and Tamil, respectively. Other type of school established by the Malaysian government is vision schools (Sekolah Wawasan). It is introduced to encourage closer inter-ethnic interaction. Primary education consists of six years of education, referred to as Year 1 to Year 6 (also known as Standard 1 to Standard 6). At the end of primary education, students in national schools are required to undergo a standardised test known as the *Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah* (UPSR) or Primary School Evaluation Test. The result of the examination will either direct them to enrol in boarding schools or any national secondary schools.

### **The Lower secondary Level (Form 1-III)**

Secondary school education consists of two divisions; the Lower secondary level and Upper Secondary level. The lower secondary school consisted of form 1 to Form III. Upon completion of primary education at the age of 12, pupils are automatically promoted to the lower secondary school which consisted of form 1 to Form III. However pupils from vernacular school (Chinese and Tamil school) are required to enrol to *Remove Class* for one year before proceeding to Form 1. This is to enable them to acquire sufficient proficiency in Malay language which is the language of instruction in all secondary schools before they continued their studies to form 1 and more. In form III, pupils need to seat for the *Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR)* examination, or known as Lower Secondary Evaluation. The results of the examination provide the basis for the selection of pupils into upper secondary school. Based on these results, pupils are also channelled into the arts, science, technical or vocational streams.

### **The Upper secondary Level (Form IV- V)**

Upper secondary education covers two years from Form IV to Form V in which students are channelled into different streams notably arts and science based from the Form III evaluation. These students are placed in normal academic secondary schools, fully residential schools, science secondary schools, and Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) junior science colleges. Meanwhile, students selected for the technical and vocational streams are placed in technical institutes or vocational schools, respectively.

The curriculum in all streams focuses on languages, science and technology, religious and moral education, civics, health education, social studies, elective subjects, and group activities. At the end of the two-year course, these students need to sit for the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)* Malaysian Certificate Education Examination, a national examination equivalent to the British General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

Vocational education provides the basic skills in vocational trades. The trades include power mechanics, motor mechanics, electrical wiring, plumbing, refrigeration and air conditioning, welding, and commerce. At the end of the two years, students will sit for the Malaysian Vocational Certificate of Education Examination. Upon successful, they may either seeking the job or joining polytechnics or other institutes for further learning.

### **Pre-university level (Form VI Lower and Upper / Matriculation Course)**

Education at this level involves two types of programmes which are the Sixth Form and Matriculation. They involve two years duration of time. This acts as a preparatory before they enter tertiary level either to public universities or other institutions of higher learning. The Sixth Form education as well as matriculation course are structured to meet the entry requirements of all universities. Form Six students need to sit for Higher School Certificate Examination (STPM) equivalent to the Overseas Cambridge School Certificate (Advanced Level) while the Matriculation students will sit for the matriculation Examination conducted by the national University of Malaysia.

## **Appendix 7: Informed Consent Form**

\* Adapted from Bloomberg and Volpe (2006, pp. 200-201)

**Researcher:** Nurul Ain Mohd Daud

**Research Title:** School Guidance and Counselling in Malaysia: A Narrative ethnography

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the beliefs about school guidance and counselling. Your participation in this study requires an interview during which you will be asked questions about your opinions and attitudes relative to your experience as student/ teacher/ counsellor/ administrator about school guidance and counselling services. The duration of the interview will be approximately 60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio taped and transcribed, the purpose thereof being to capture and maintain an accurate record of the discussion. Your name will not be used at all. On all transcripts and data collected you will be referred to only by way of pseudonym. This study will be conducted by the researcher Nurul Ain Mohd Daud, a doctoral candidate at Bristol University. The interview will be undertaken at a time and location that is mutually suitable.

### **Risks and Benefits:**

This research will hopefully contribute to understanding the participants' cultural values towards school guidance and counselling services, and so the potential benefit of this study is improvement of guidance and counselling in the respective school. There is no financial remuneration for your participation in this study.

### **Data storage to protect Confidentiality:**

Under no circumstances whatsoever will you be identified by name in the course of this research study, or in any publication thereof. Every effort will be made that all information provided by you will be treated as strictly confidential. All data will be coded and securely stored, and will be used for professional purposes only.

### **How the results will be used:**

This research study is to be submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Bristol University, UK. The results of this study will be published as a dissertation. In addition, information may be used for educational purposes in professional presentation (s) and/ or educational publication (s).

## **PART 2: Participant's rights**

- I have read and discussed the research description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.
  - My participation in this research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without jeopardy to future medical care, employment, student status or other entitlements.
  - The researcher may withdraw me from the research at her professional discretion
  - If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available that may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide the information to me.
  - Any information derived from the research that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
  - If at any time I have questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the researcher, who will answer my questions. The researcher's email is norein47@yahoo.com.
  - Audio taping is part of the research. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have the access to written and taped materials.
- ( ) I consent to participate in. (Please check one)
- ( ) Individual interview session
- ( ) Group interview
- ( ) Casual conversation
- ( ) I consent to being recorded during the selected session (s) above.
- ( ) I consent to the recordings being analysed for the research purposes. Anonymity will be preserved if extracts are included in research publication or reports.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 8: Interview guides (Student) (Individual Interview)

Research Questions	Interview Guides
<p>1.1 What are the typical cultural values and attitudes of students in school?</p>	<p>Could you please tell me about yourself?</p> <p>Could you please describe what sort of person are you?</p> <p>Tell me about your life.</p> <p>What characteristics such as value or trait about yourself or your family you are particularly proud of?</p> <p>Describe any childhood experiences from which you derive these values.</p> <p>List a few life experiences that have significantly supported or challenged your values.</p> <p>Describe the impact that you have had on the values as you hold them today.</p> <p>Could you please describe your experiences in school?</p>
<p>1.2 How do the students report their values and experiences of school and what explanations do they offer to explain their experiences and attitudes to school</p>	<p>How would you describe your experiences in school?</p> <p>I would like you to indicate people who have influenced your cultural identity in school.</p> <p>Who or what group has been most influential in school? Why?</p>
<p>2.0 What are the students' values of counsellors and the guidance and counselling services in this school?</p>	<p>Describe your values of counselling services.</p> <p>How do you perceive other students who seek help from counselling services in</p>

	<p>school?</p> <p>Could you please describe how your experienced being counselled?</p> <p>Can you recall your parent's reaction if you told them that you were being sent for counselling.</p> <p>How would you summarize your views of seeking help from counsellors?</p> <p>What advantages and disadvantages are associated with the counselling unit as a source of help?</p> <p>How do you rate your willingness or reluctance to seek counselling on a scale of 1 – 10 (1 being extremely reluctance and 10 being very enthusiastic), Please explain your rating.</p>
<p>2.1 How do the students explain their cultural values and experiences in this school?</p>	<p>Could you please share your story regarding your experience in dealing with the school counsellor?</p> <p>Describe any experience during your involvement in school counselling programmes.</p> <p>When seeing a school counsellor :</p> <p>What qualities do you look for a school counsellor?</p> <p>What are the elements that you like and you hate most in counselling?</p>



## Interview Guides (Student) - Group interviews

Research Questions	Interview Guides
1.2 What are the typical cultural values and attitudes of students in school?	<p>Could you please tell me about yourself?</p> <p>Could you please describe what sort of person are you?</p> <p>Could you please describe your experiences in school?</p>
1.2 How do the students report their cultural values and experiences of school and what explanations do they offer to explain their experiences and attitudes to school	<p>How would you describe your experiences in school?</p> <p>I would like you to indicate people who have influenced your cultural identity in school.</p> <p>Who or what group has been most influential in school? Why?</p>
2.0 What are the students' cultural values of counsellors and the guidance and counselling services in this school?	<p>Describe your cultural values of counselling services.</p> <p>How do you perceive other students who seek help from counselling services in school?</p> <p>Could you please describe how your experienced being counselled?</p> <p>Can you recall your parent's reaction if you told them that you were being sent for counselling.</p> <p>How would you summarize your views of seeking help from counsellors?</p> <p>What advantages and disadvantages are associated with the counselling unit as a source of help?</p>

<p>2.1 How do the students explain their cultural values and attitudes in relation to counsellors and the guidance and counselling service in this school?</p>	<p>Could you please share your story regarding your experience in dealing with the school counsellor?</p> <p>Describe any experience during your involvement in school counselling programmes.</p> <p>When seeing a school counsellor :</p> <p>What qualities do you look for a school counsellor?</p> <p>What are the elements that you like and you hate most in counselling?</p>
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## Appendix 9: Interview Guides for school counsellors

Research Questions	Interview Guides
1.3 What are the typical cultural values and attitudes of students in school?	Could you please describe about students' cultural values?
1.2 How do the school counsellors report the students' cultural values and experiences of school and what explanations do they offer to explain their experiences of school and attitudes to school?	Could you please explain how do the students exhibit their cultural values in school?
2.0 What are the school counsellors' values of guidance and counselling services in this school?	<p>Could you please tell me your experiences being a school counsellor here?</p> <p>Could you please describe what type of clients do you always encounter?</p>
2.1 How do students' cultural values affect their perception of counsellors and counselling services?	<p>Describe any experience during your involvement in school counselling programmes.</p> <p>What qualities do the students look for a school counsellor?</p> <p>What are the hindrances that you encountered handling guidance and counselling services in this school?</p> <p>What kinds of improvements need to be taken to upgrade the counselling services?</p>

### Appendix 10: Interview Guides for school administrators

Research Questions	Interview Guides
1.0 What are the typical cultural values and attitudes of students in school?	<p>Could you please tell me your experiences being a school administrator?</p> <p>Could you please describe the students' cultural values?</p>
1.1 How do the school communities report the students' cultural values and experiences of school and what explanations do they offer to explain their experiences of school and attitudes to school?	<p>What are the factors that shape students' cultural values?</p> <p>What are the hindrances that you encountered handling students in this school?</p>
2.0 What are the school administrators' values of counsellors and the guidance and counselling services in this school	<p>What are your values towards counsellors and counselling services in this school?</p>
2.1 How do the school administrators' explain their cultural values and attitudes in relation to counsellors and the guidance and counselling service in this school?	<p>Could you please share your story regarding your experience in dealing with the school counsellor?</p> <p>How do you perceive school guidance and counselling services?</p> <p>How do you perceive students who seek help from counselling services in school?</p> <p>What kind of improvements need to be undertaken to upgrade counselling services in this school?</p> <p>What qualities do you look for a school counsellor?</p> <p>Describe your expectations of the counselling services.</p>

### Appendix 11: Interview guides for schoolteachers

Research Questions	Interview Guides
1.0 What are the typical cultural values and attitudes of students in school	<p>Could you please tell me your experiences being a school teacher?</p> <p>Could you please describe the students' cultural values?</p>
1.1 How do the school communities report the students' cultural values and experiences of school and what explanations do they offer to explain their experiences of school and attitudes to school?	<p>What are the factors that shape students' cultural values?</p> <p>What are the hindrances that you encountered handling students in this school?</p>
2.0 What are the school administrators' cultural values of counsellors and the guidance and counselling services in this school?	<p>What are your values towards counsellors and counselling services in this school?</p>
2.1 How do the school administrators' explain their cultural values and attitudes in relation to counsellors and the guidance and counselling service in this school?	<p>Could you please share your story regarding your experience in dealing with the school counsellor?</p> <p>How do you perceive school guidance and counselling services?</p> <p>How do you perceive students who seek help from counselling services in school?</p> <p>What kind of improvements need to be undertaken to upgrade counselling services in this school?</p> <p>What qualities do you look for a school counsellor?</p> <p>Describe your expectations of the counselling services.</p>

### Appendix 12: Sample Overview of Information Needed

Research Questions	Information Needed	Methods
What are the typical cultural values and attitudes of students in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School communities' stories about students' cultural values.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual Interview and group interviews from students, school counsellors, teachers and school administrator.</li> <li>Observation</li> <li>Casual conversation</li> </ul>
How do the students, school counsellors, schoolteachers, school administrators report the students' cultural values and experiences of school and what explanations do they offer to explain their experiences of school and attitudes to school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Where the values came from?</li> <li>What are the factors that formed students' cultural values?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual Interview and group interviews from students, school counsellors, teachers and school administrator.</li> <li>Observation</li> <li>Casual conversation</li> </ul>
What are (students, school counsellors, schoolteachers, school administrators) cultural values of counsellors and the guidance and counselling services in this school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School communities' values of guidance and counselling services.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual Interview and group interviews from students, school counsellors, teachers and school administrator.</li> </ul>
How do school counselors, schoolteachers, and school administrators explain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do the school communities explain students' cultural values as well as their</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual Interview and group interviews from students, school counsellors, teachers and</li> </ul>

<p>students' cultural values as well as their own values and experiences in school?</p>	<p>own towards school counselling services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What made they opt for or avoid from guidance and counselling services.</li> <li>• Students and school communities' opinions and suggestions with regard to improvement of school guidance and counselling services</li> </ul>	<p>school administrator.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observation</li> <li>• Casual conversation</li> </ul>
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**Appendix 13: Data summary Table: Students**

<b>No</b>	<b>Names ( Pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Involvement in counselling</b>	<b>Individual Interview</b>	<b>Group Interview</b>	<b>Casual conversation</b>
1.	Aziz	<b>ReF</b>	/		
2.	Govindasamy	<b>ReF</b>	/		
3.	Aisya	<b>ReF</b>	/		
4.	Raju	<b>ReF</b>	/		
5.	Ah Leong	<b>ReF</b>	/		
6.	Rive	<b>ReF</b>	/		
7.	Nahin	<b>ReF</b>	/		
8.	Joseph	<b>ReF</b>	/		
9.	Krishna	<b>ReF</b>	/		
10.	Mahendran	<b>ReF</b>	/		
11.	Muthu	<b>ReF</b>	/		
12.	Farish	<b>ReF</b>		/	
13.	Firdaus	<b>ReF</b>		/	
14.	Bob	<b>ReF</b>		/	
15.	Bobo	<b>Uninvolved</b>		/	
16.	Yuyu	<b>Uninvolved</b>		/	
17.	Lai	<b>Uninvolved</b>		/	
18.	Feng	<b>Uninvolved</b>		/	
19.	Jess	<b>Uninvolved</b>		/	
20.	Tiz	<b>Uninvolved</b>		/	
21.	May	<b>Uninvolved</b>		/	



22.	Chu	Uninvolved		/	
23.	Ah Keong	Uninvolved		/	
24.	Jia	Uninvolved		/	
25.	Peng	Uninvolved		/	
26.	Leng	Uninvolved		/	
27.	Ling	Uninvolved		/	/
28	Gopal	Uninvolved			/
29	Raja	Uninvolved			/
30	Reema	Uninvolved			/
31.	Kareena	SR		/	
32.	Simala	SR		/	
33.	Karisma	SR		/	
34.	Aishwarya	SR		/	
35.	Nirmala	SR		/	
36.	Neeha	SR		/	
31.	Azroy	SR	/		
37.	Shu	SR	/		
38.	Devi	SR			/
39.	Ratna	SR			/
40.	Kumari	SR			/
41.	Santini	SR			/

[ / ] Participated in

**ReF:** Referred clients

**Uninvolved:** Uninvolved in counselling

**SR:** Self-Referred clients

## Staff

Num	Name	Staff	Individual interview	Casual conversation
42	Madam Rohaya	Counsellors	/	
43	Mr Siva	Counsellors	/	
44	Madam Nora	Counsellors	/	
45	Madam Rose	Counsellors	/	
46	Madam Hamidah	Counsellors	/	
47	Madam Fara	Counsellors	/	
48	Madam Asma	Counsellors	/	
49	Madam Fazura	Counsellors		/
50	Madam Fateema	School Principal	/	
51	Mr Adam	Head of Extra Curricular Activities	/	
52	Mr Loga	Head of Discipline	/	
53	Madam Yati	Senior Assistant Administration	/	
54	Mr Lim	Head of student affairs	/	
55	Madam Nur	Teacher	/	
56	Madam Kamala	Teacher	/	
57	Madam Ray	Teacher		/

**Appendix 14: Within and across case analytical strategies for exploring students' cultural values and attitudes to counselling  
(Counsellors' stories)**

Comparison	Purpose	Strategy	Product
Within individual	Identify important aspects of cultural values	Close reading of individual interviews and summaries	Coding categories themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seven school counsellors</li> </ul>			
Across group of individuals	Identify variation around themes	Data coding and display	Sub themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seven school counsellors</li> </ul>			
Within units of participants	Identify configurations of themes within unit of participants	Close reading of individual interviews and summaries	Additional themes based on within the students discrepancies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School counsellors</li> </ul>			
Across units participants	Compare participants' views across units of participants	Interviews summaries	Refined participants' cultural values, exemplar cases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students</li> <li>School administrators</li> <li>Teachers</li> </ul>			

**Appendix 15: Within and across case analytical strategies for exploring students' cultural values and attitudes to counselling  
(School Administrators' stories)**

Comparison	Purpose	Strategy	Product
<b>Within individual categories</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School Principal</li> <li>Senior Assistant (Administrative)</li> <li>Head of Students' Affairs</li> <li>Senior Assistant (Extra Curri. Activities)</li> <li>Head of Discipline Unit</li> </ul>	Identify important aspects of cultural values	Close reading of individual interviews and summaries themes	Coding categories and themes
<b>Across group of individuals</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School Principal</li> <li>Senior Assistant (Administrative)</li> <li>Head of Students' Affairs</li> <li>Senior Assistant (Extra Curricular Activities)</li> <li>Head of Discipline Unit</li> </ul>	Identify variation around themes	Data coding and display	Sub themes
<b>Within units of participants</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School Administrators</li> </ul>	Identify configurations of themes within unit of participants	Close reading of individual interviews and summaries	Additional themes based on within the participants' discrepancies
<b>Across units participants</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students</li> <li>School counsellors</li> <li>Teachers</li> </ul>	Compare views across units of participants	Interviews summaries	Refined cultural values, exemplar cases

**Appendix 16: Within and across case analytical strategies for exploring students' cultural values and attitudes to counselling  
(Teachers' stories)**

Comparison	Purpose	Strategy	Product
Within individual	Identify important aspects of cultural values	Close reading of individual interviews and summaries	Coding categories themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Madam Nur</li><li>• Madam Kamala</li></ul>			
Across group of individuals	Identify variation around themes	Data coding and display	Sub themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Madam Nur</li><li>• Madam Kamala</li></ul>			
Within units of participants	Identify configurations of themes within unit of participants and summaries	Close reading of individual interviews	Additional themes based on within the participants' discrepancies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• School teachers</li></ul>			
Across units participants	Compare students views across units of participants	Interviews summaries	Refined participants' cultural values, exemplar cases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students</li><li>• School administrators</li><li>• Counsellors</li></ul>			

## **Appendix 17: Code mapping (Students' stories)**

Code Mapping: Three iterations of analysis (to be read from the bottom up)

### **Students' stories**

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#### **THIRD ITERATION: APPLICATION TO DATA SET**

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"Differentiation of students' involvement in guidance and counselling"

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#### **SECOND ITERATION: PATTERN VARIABLES, COMPARISONS, AND EXPLANATIONS**

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##### **Referred clients**

"Finally I can see the lights at the end of the tunnel"

"I think I found my way home"

"Finding hope gaining insights"

##### **Uninvolved in counselling**

"They are not meant for us"

##### **Self referred clients**

"We belong together"

---

#### **FIRST ITERATION: INITIAL CODES / SURFACE CONTENT ANALYSIS/ DESCRIPTIVE CODING**

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Students' profiles

Stories before the session

Stories after the session

Linked counselling to disciplinary problems

Sense of detachment from teachers and counsellors

Language barrier

No fun and exciting activities

Sense of attachment

Others' perceptions towards counselling

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## **Appendix: 18 Code Mapping (Counsellors' stories)**

Code Mapping: Three iterations of analysis (to be read from the bottom up)  
**Counsellors' stories**

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### **THIRD ITERATION: APPLICATION TO DATA SET**

"The plight of school counsellors"

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### **SECOND ITERATION: PATTERN VARIABLES, COMPARISONS, EXPLANATIONS**

"Its blood, sweat and sometimes tears"

"When two worlds collide"

"Travelling a rocky road"

"It is not the end.. it is just the beginning"

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### **FIRST ITERATION: INITIAL CODES / SURFACE CONTENT ANALYSIS/ DESCRIPTIVE CODING**

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Descriptions of reluctance among students

Students' attitudes towards counselling

Students' language barriers

Variations in students' attitude problems

Differences in disclosing problems

Students' cultural values

Teachers' negative acceptance

Lack of infrastructure

School administrators' negative acceptance

Counselling being an object of prejudice and stigma

Different approaches in handling students.

Ways to improve counselling services in school.

## **Appendix 19: Code mapping (Schoolteachers' stories)**

Code Mapping: Three iterations of analysis (to be read from the bottom up)

### **Schoolteachers' stories**

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#### **THIRD ITERATION: APPLICATION TO DATA SET**

“School community’s deteriorating climate”

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#### **SECOND ITERATION: PATTERN VARIABLES, COMPARISONS, EXPLANATIONS AND BUILD MODELS**

Stories of Madam Nur – “They do not serve us well”

Stories of Madam Kamala – “It’s too hot to handle”

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#### **FIRST ITERATION: INITIAL CODES / SURFACE CONTENT ANALYSIS/ DESCRIPTIVE CODING**

Students’ attitudes

School’s situation

Teachers’ characteristics

Ways to solve the matter

Perceived role of counsellors and counselling services

Ways to improve school counselling services



## **Appendix 20: Code mapping (Administrators' stories)**

Code Mapping: Three iterations of analysis (to be read from the bottom up)

Administrators' stories

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### **THIRD ITERATION: APPLICATION TO DATA SET**

Reformation of faith: It's a mutual effort!!

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### **SECOND ITERATION: PATTERN VARIABLES, COMPARISONS, EXPLANATIONS AND BUILD MODELS**

"It's beyond our grasp"

"They are near and yet so far"

"...nevertheless it's still foggy and blurry"

---

### **FIRST ITERATION: INITIAL CODES / SURFACE CONTENT ANALYSIS/ DESCRIPTIVE CODING**

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It's too hot to handle

A flicker of hope

Students' disengagement

A clash of interest

"It's not meant for them"

"Stuck in a silent tongue"

"Meeting those needs aren't possible"

## **Appendix 21: Core Theme**

Code Mapping: Three iterations of analysis (to be read from the bottom up)

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### **THIRD ITERATION: APPLICATION TO DATA SET**

“School guidance and counselling: Lost in the midst of systemic process”.

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### **SECOND ITERATION: PATTERN VARIABLES, COMPARISONS, EXPLANATIONS AND BUILD MODELS**

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Systemic processes collectively mentioned by participants – related to:

- a) Large numbers of students – including troublesome students –deteriorating values
  - b) Lack of school’s physical facilities and manpower
- 

<b>Students’ stories</b>	“Differentiation of students’ involvements in guidance and counselling”
<b>School counsellors’ stories</b>	“The plight of the school counsellors”
<b>Teachers’ stories</b>	“School community’s deteriorating climate”
<b>School administrators’ stories</b>	“Reformation of faith: It’s a mutual effort!”

Appendix 22: Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data triangulation

Major finding	Source of Data				
	II	GI	PO	NP	CC
Deteriorating values of students and the school system					
1. Referred students/ underachievers/ high achievers displayed their sense of estrangement from school.	X	X		X	X
2. Regarded school as secondary to their part time jobs after school.	X	X			
3. Developed sense of disrespect towards the school community.	X		X	X	X
4. Erosion of boundaries and deterioration of values between students and the school community.	X			X	X
5. Peer groups were reported as the biggest influence in students' lives.	X				
6. School had turned out to be the best place for strengthening students' bad influences.	X				

Note: II= Individual Interview    GI= Group Interview    PO= Participant Observation    NP= Non-Participant Observation    CC= Casual Conversation

### Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data triangulation

Major finding	II	GI	Source of Data PO	NP	CC
<b>Different values towards the role and status of Guidance and Counselling Services</b>					
1. Referred clients and those uninvolved in counselling perceived that guidance and Counselling services were meant for students in trouble.	X	X		X	X
2. Counsellors were viewed as the ones who deal with students' disciplinary problems and those in trouble.	X	X		X	X
3. Guidance and counselling offered less interesting activities		X		X	
4. Referred clients displayed their reluctance for fear of punishment following disciplinary problems.	X				X
5. Perceived of social stigma and negative label towards counselling		X	X		X
6. Referred clients and those uninvolved in counselling began to show their interest towards the service after been exposed to them.	X	X		X	
7. Self referred clients indicated their sense of connection and belonging to the service due to positive attitudes and exposure.		X			
8. Perceived of counselling role ambiguity.	X			X	X
9. Lack of physical resources and man power / no cooperation from the school community.	X			X	X
10. School guidance and counselling services had not extensively reached the whole students population.	X				

Note: II= Individual Interview GI= Group Interview PO= Participant Observation NP= Non-Participant Observation CC= Casual Conversation

Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data triangulation

Major finding	S	C	Source of Data T	A
<b>Different values towards the role and status of Guidance and Counselling Services</b>				
1. Guidance and Counselling services were meant for troublesome students.	X	X	X	X
2. Counsellors were viewed as the ones who deal with students' disciplinary problems and those in trouble.	X	X	X	X
3. (Students) Referred clients displayed their reluctance for fear of punishment following disciplinary problems.	X (ReF)	X		X
4. Stigma and negative labelling connected to counselling services	X	X	X	X
5. Referred clients and those uninvolved in counselling began to show their interest towards the service after been exposed to them.	X	X		
6. Self referred clients indicated their sense of connection and belonging to the service due to positive attitudes and exposure.	X(SR)			
7. School counselling – ambiguous role	X	X	X	X
8. Lack of physical resources and man power / no cooperation from the school community.	X	X	X	
9. School guidance and counselling services had not extensively reached the whole students population.	X	X	X	

Note: S=Student C= Counsellor T= Teacher A= Administrator  
UN = Uninvolved in counselling ReF=Referred clients SR= Self Referred

**Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data triangulation**

Major finding	Source of Data			
	S	C	T	A
<b>Different values of school counsellors</b>				
1. School counsellors' powerlessness in the school community		X		X
2. Counsellors were viewed as the ones who deal with students' disciplinary problems and those in trouble.	X	X	X	X
3. The individual counselling approach which was mainly conducted by counsellors was not effective in tackling students in mass populations		X		
4. Counsellors' approaches were unappealing and unlikely to suit the needs of the students and teachers.	X(UN)		X	X
5. Counsellor's lack of multicultural competencies	X	X	X	
6. Counsellors' negative characteristics	X (UN)			
7. Sense of attachment to counsellors	X (SR) (ReF)		X (Kamala)	

Note: S=Student C= Counsellor T= Teacher A= Administrator

UN = Uninvolved in counselling ReF=Referred clients SR= Self Referred clients

### Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data triangulation

Major finding	Source of Data			
	S	C	T	A
<b>School guidance and counselling services were unappealing, ineffective and unlikely to suit the needs of the school community</b>				
1. Less interesting and creative guidance and counselling activities offered.	X(UN)		X	X
2. Lack of physical resources.	X(UN)	X	X	X
3. Stigma connected to counselling services.	X	X	X	X
4. Counsellors - Lack of contextual approaches in dealing with students	X (UN)	X	X	X
5. School counsellors - Lack of multicultural competencies	X(UN)	X	X	X
For example: ability to address language barriers.				

Note: S=Student C= Counsellor T= Teacher A= Administrator

UN = Uninvolved in counselling ReF=Referred clients SR= Self Referred

**Appendix 23: Overall Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data triangulation**

Findings	II	GI	PO	NP	CC
<b>Deteriorating values of students and the school system</b>					
Students	X	X	X	X	X
School Counsellors	X		X	X	X
Teachers	X		X	X	X
Administrators	X				
<b>Different values towards the role and status of Guidance and Counselling Services</b>					
Students	X	X	X	X	X
School counsellors	X		X	X	X
Teachers	X				
Administrators	X				
<b>Different values of school counsellors</b>					
Students	X	X		X	X
School counsellors	X		X		
Teachers	X			X	
Administrators	X			X	
<b>School guidance and counselling services were unappealing, ineffective and unlikely to suit the needs of the school community</b>					
Students	X	X		X	
School counsellors	X		X		
Teachers	X			X	
Administrators	X				

Note: II= Individual Interview    GI= Group Interview    PO= Participant Observation    NP= Non-Participant Observation    CC= Casual Conversation



### Appendix 24: School's merit and demerit systems

Code	Misbehaviour	Demerit marks
<b>1</b>	<b>Criminal activities</b>	
111	Gambling	20
112	Theft	20
113	Threaten, beat a teacher	80
114	Threaten, beat school prefect	30
115	Involve in blackmail	30
116	Bullying	30
117	Involve in gangsters	30
118	Drug addiction	100
119	Carrying harmful weapon	80
120	Molesting	100
121	Threaten or beat other students	30
122	Intrusion	30
124	Involve in a strike or in an illegal riot	30
125	Involve in betting and gambling	30

2	behaviour	Demerit marks
221	Kissing	30
222	Seclusion	30
223	Carrying pornographic stuffs	30
224	Peeping	20
225	Using obscene words	20
226	Drawing pornographic images	20

<b>3</b>		<b>Demerit marks</b>
<b>331</b>	Keeping long, fashionable and coloured hair	10
<b>332</b>	Having long nails	05
<b>333</b>	Keeping beard or moustache	05
<b>334</b>	Disobey the school's attire	10
<b>335</b>	Wearing jewellery at school	10

<b>4</b>	<b>behaviour</b>	<b>Demerit marks</b>
<b>441</b>	Hang around	05
<b>442</b>	Late to school	05
<b>443</b>	Late at school assembly	05
<b>444</b>	Having breakfast or lunch outside the recess period	10

<b>5</b>	<b>Impolite / rude</b>	<b>Demerit marks</b>
<b>551</b>	Display rude behaviour in front of teacher	20
<b>552</b>	Rude in front of school prefect	10
<b>553</b>	Rude in front of other pupils	10
<b>554</b>	Using inappropriate words/ rude words	10
<b>555</b>	Carrying or keeping tobacco	20
<b>556</b>	Smoking	30
<b>557</b>	Disturbing teaching and learning	30
<b>558</b>	Not respecting teachers	30
<b>559</b>	No respect to school prefect	10
<b>560</b>	Consume alcohol	30

<b>6</b>	<b>Destructive behaviour</b>	<b>Demerit marks</b>
<b>661</b>	Destroy the school's property	20

<b>662</b>	Destroy the teacher's property	20
<b>663</b>	Destroy the canteen's property	20
<b>664</b>	Destroy the pupil's property	20

<b>7</b>	<b>Dishonesty</b>	<b>Demerit marks</b>
<b>771</b>	Dishonest – involving money	30
<b>772</b>	Dishonest – involving trust	30

<b>8</b>	<b>Truancy</b>	<b>Demerit marks</b>
<b>881</b>	Classroom truancy	10
<b>882</b>	School Truancy	20
<b>883</b>	Playing truant in the school assembly	10
<b>884</b>	Playing truant in co-curricular activities	05
<b>885</b>	Truancy from classroom's test	10
<b>886</b>	Playing truant from exam	20
<b>887</b>	Playing truant for a private study	20

<b>9</b>	<b>Other crimes</b>	<b>Demerit marks</b>
<b>991</b>	Involve in a fight	30
<b>992</b>	Mischief, hooliganism	20
<b>993</b>	Cyber criminal	20
<b>994</b>	Carrying mobile phone to school	20

## Merit system

1	Neatness	Merit system
111	Not keeping long hair and obey the school's rules and regulations	5
112	Not having long nails	3
113	Not keeping beard or moustache	3
114	Wearing a proper school uniform	5
115	Wearing no jewellery at school	10

2	Time management	Merit system
211	Does not hang around the school compound for at least one month	3
212	Arrive at school on time for one month	3
213	Attend the school assembly on time for one month	3
214	Does not have lunch at school canteen outside the recess hour	3

3	Having a polite behaviour	Merit system
311	Well-behaved in front of the school communities	10
312	Obey the school prefect	3
313	Not using inappropriate language	3
314	Not smoking	10
315	Not disturb learning and teaching processes	10

4	Truancy management	Merit system
411	Does not play truant from a classroom for one month	5
412	Does not play truant from school	10
413	Does not skip the school assembly	5
414	Does not play truancy for private study	10



5	Other merits behaviour	Merit system
551	Clean the school's compound	10
552	Fix the school's furniture	10
553	Keep the school tidy and beautiful	10
554	Help teacher in a school's programme	8
555	Provide a report about fighting case	8
556	Provide a report about truancy	8
557	Provide a report about smoking	8
558	Provide a report about theft	8
559	Provide a report about vandalism	8
560	Become a witness for an investigation	5
561	Return the lost things	5
562	Uphold the school's name through participation in various activities	10
563	Become a school representative in various competition	10